Occupational Violence and the Crisis in White Masculinity in Turn-of-the-Millennium American Fiction

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Abstract

My dissertation examines white masculine anxieties compelled by death and violence in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997). A close reading of the four novels in tandem reveals important dynamics of a subgenre of American masculinist fiction in a period of rapid technological change. The novels represent the travails of white male protagonists whose "occupational spheres," comprising jobs, domestic spaces and recreational pursuits, are meant to protect them from undesirable threats and the dread of death. I argue that these protagonists, who are immersed in their respective occupational spheres, do not comprehend the complex violence in which their occupations implicate them, nor do they appreciate the impossibility of insulating their "interior" simulated habitats from the supposedly toxic "outside" worlds that surround them.

In the first chapter, I analyze Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, which I claim inaugurates the subgenre of American fiction to which all four novels belong, and conclude that the protagonist, Jack Gladney, is caught up in a cycle of "*re-mediation*." His efforts to *remedy* his ills are only *remediated* into a medial milieu that further undermines his agency. In the second chapter, I track Patrick Bateman's occupational sphere in *American Psycho* that manifests the classed, raced, and sexualized systemic violence of Wall Street finance itself. The third chapter on *Fight Club* explores the anonymous narrator's violent occupation as an actuarial risk analyst for a major automotive manufacturer. The last chapter, on *American Pastoral*, analyzes the insidious violence

of the protagonist Seymour Levov's occupation as a glove-manufacturing entrepreneur and seeming-apogee of the Jewish American dream of white assimilation.

This dissertation project is partly an intervention in DeLillo, Easton Ellis, Palahniuk, and Roth criticism, much of which is still atavistically stuck in a pre-digital moment. By and large, the existing criticism, I contend, does not pay enough attention to the densely-mediated environments inhabited by the novels' protagonists. My engagement with these novels draws upon rhetorical analysis, genre theory, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, gender theory, and new media studies.

Preface

This dissertation emerged out of a course of study and extensive dialogues with my committee members—Glenn Deer, Bo Earle, and Mike Zeitlin—as well as conversations with Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Robert Brain whose classes on German media studies and media archeology I have taken or audited at UBC. The following work is my original and independent research.

A yet-to-be titled essay on J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* that was originally meant to be a chapter of this dissertation project will now instead appear as a chapter in a forthcoming Palgrave MacMillan book entitled *Performing Utopias in the Contemporary Americas*.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Preliminary Remarks: Masculine Death Anxiety and Mediated Occupational Spheres

It is a commonplace that rapid technological changes have altered our working lives in profound ways. Contemporary American writers have responded to this situation through imaginative novels that often feature anxious male protagonists who attempt to navigate their way through their bewildering media environments. This dissertation argues that Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) participate in a subgenre of American masculinist fiction that interrogates the vital role of the occupational sphere in this rapidly changing American environment. In each of the four novels, what I refer to as the protagonist's "occupational sphere," an insular network comprising work, home, and recreation, is figured as a sophisticated medial lifeworld or organizing matrix of the world. These protagonists, who are immersed in their respective occupational spheres, do not comprehend the complex violence in which their occupations implicate them, nor do they appreciate the impossibility of insulating their "interior" simulated habitats from the supposedly toxic "outside" worlds that contain them.

To take one example of this dynamic, in *American Pastoral*, Seymour Levov's glove manufacturing business is persistently figured as an integral component of the occupational "castle" (*Pastoral* 86) meant to hygienically protect him from the violent incursion of 1960's America. On closer inspection, however, his business that materially envelopes hands in protective leather gloves is bound up with layers of systemic violence, ranging from the subordination of racial minorities and women to the murderous rendering of animals. Moreover,

what he conceptualizes as "the plague America" (86) infiltrates his occupational habitat by way of toxic media influences that turn his own daughter, Merry, into a violent anti-American terrorist. Merry, the "Indigenous American berserk" (86), turns against everything Seymour stands for and forces him to confront his culpability for the violence he has unwittingly perpetrated through and within his occupational station.

This dissertation project is, in part, an intervention in DeLillo, Easton Ellis, Palahniuk, and Roth criticism, much of which is still atavistically stuck in a pre-digital moment. By and large, the existing criticism, I contend, does not pay enough attention to the densely mediated environments inhabited by the novels' protagonists. But close readings of the novels in question bring their medial contours into relief. Such readings disclose the structural logic of the protagonists' occupational universes as that of the digital media environment that has now enveloped the world. In each of these novels, this occupational double-bind—whereby the occupation figures as both permeable medium and supposedly impermeable protective barrier—leads to vital questions about the relationship between mediality, violence, and the occupational sphere.

The necessity of bringing new media perspectives to bear, most of which emerge out of the coordinates of the twenty-first century global village, may seem counter-intuitive in the case of *White Noise*, which was published in 1985, decades before the Internet consolidated itself in the American imaginary and cellular telephony enveloped the world. However, as my analysis will show, the structural logic of DeLillo's novel can be understood only through a media-centric analysis of the interplay of protagonist Jack Gladney's occupational nexus and the environment in which it is nested. This reading underscores the extent to which Gladney's occupational lifeworld is a media environment, crackling with "coded messages" (*WN* 51) and "charged

waves" (103); and his colloquial environment, including the air he breathes, is increasingly defined by a toxic "high-definition event" (138)—or, in the parlance of media theorist Peter Sloterdijk (2009), a medial *atmo-sphere*. What emerges from this novel line of inquiry is a cluster of conceptual concerns and formal features that constitute the nucleus of a subgenre of turn-of-the-millennium American masculinist fiction that fans out centrifugally through *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*, all of which participate in the literary milieu shaped by DeLillo. One central concern is how to deal with the pervasive threat of death in environments that are perceived, however justifiably, as toxic or hostile. Such masculinist fictions, as I will demonstrate, are particularly preoccupied with the relationship between death and the occupational sphere. Death is such an important influence that it should come as no surprise that treatises on death have been influential on novelists such as Don DeLillo.

The above threat of death is certainly taken up in critical fashion by David Cowart's (2003) account of the influence of Ernest Becker's psychoanalytic treatise *The Denial of Death* (1973) on *White Noise*. Cowart observes that *The Denial of Death* "… not only discusses a culture-wide failure to come to terms with death (since we no longer have the spiritual wherewithal to keep it at bay) but also argues that our dread is the powerful motivating force within modern culture" (77), all issues that he sees as percolating through every page of DeLillo's novel. Indeed, in a fashion that echoes *The Denial of Death*, the forms of life occupied by Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies, and his wife Babette, a consumer of pills meant to reduce her crippling dread of death, are clearly organized around buffering them against the forces of annihilation that besiege them at every turn. This dread of death re-emerges in *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*.

Given the complexity and importance of death, occupational spheres, and forms of violence in these texts, I will provide contextualizing surveys of the relevant critical literature and explain how my readings of the novels will contribute to a new understanding of representations of death, occupational violence, and white masculine anxieties. I will begin this introduction, first, with a selective survey of critical approaches to death in American literature. Second, I will connect these representations of death to theorizations of the "occupation" and forms of occupational violence. Third, my theorizing of occupational violence will help to unpack the violence that circulates through the "white collar" class and racial identities of the protagonists in *White Noise*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*. These selective surveys of representations of death, concepts of the "occupation," and forms of occupational violence—as inflected by white-collar class, gender, and racial identities—will also highlight the core concepts and methods of reading that I will carry forward in the chapters that follow this introduction.

1.2 Deadlocks and Drives: Surveying Death in American Literature

Amongst the significant number of critics who have addressed the representation of death in American fiction, Lucy Frank's (2007) broad survey of the diverse representations of death in nineteenth-century fiction points to the necessity of keeping critical theoretical optics tethered to the intricacies of primary texts that represent a wide variety of occupations and situations. Lee Edelman (2007) focuses on the "death drive," a "queer" operation that he situates at the heart of both canonical narratives and American culture as a whole, while James R. Giles (2006), Olivia Burgess (2012), and Monica Hogan (2004) all dwell trenchantly on the specific occupational

settings of death and violence in *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*, respectively.

Lucy Frank spends much of the introduction to *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture* critiquing what she perceives to be the pervasive cliché of nineteenth-century representations of mortality as "lachrymose deathbed scenes" (5). While she acknowledges that such scenes can be found in the work of writers like Stowe and Twain, she claims that it is a much more heterogeneous field than many readers give it credit for. The diverse criticism on the figuration and conceptualization of death in nineteenth-century American literature, she observes, gravitates towards issues pertaining not only to mourning and sentimental literature but also to racial, gender, and class exclusion, the death-toll and "living death" of slavery, Christian doctrines about death and the afterlife, the ethics of suicide, the carnage of the American Civil War, and the responsibilities of survivors towards the dead (6-10).

Though the twentieth-century literary field is at least as heterogeneous, a dominant critical strategy for surveying the representation of death in more contemporary American fiction involves the application of stereotypically "postmodern" critical methods to putatively "postmodern" literature; thus, some readers tend to find precisely what they are looking for (as in McHale, 1987; Bronfen, 1992; Scanlan, 2001; Perdigao, 2010). In this vein, the introduction to the influential *Death and Representation* (1993) registers as a redundant rehearsal of Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* in a more deconstructive lexicon when editors Bronfen and Goodwin assert

> Death is . . . necessarily constructed by a culture; it grounds the many ways a culture stabilizes and represents itself, and yet it always does so as a signifier with

> an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, always pointing to other signifiers, other means of representing what finally is just absent. Representations of death thus often serve as metatropes for the process of representation itself. (4)

Still, critics should by no means be faulted for recapitulating Becker's now shopworn, but still trenchant, assertions about the dread-inducing pervasiveness of death. This critical impasse emerges, in part, from the difficulty in moving beyond the meta-fictive modes of postmodern fiction, critical approaches that emphasize the outer limits of meaning, and the accompanying "death of the author" (Barthes) that unmoored the text from intentional constraints.

One viable escape route from the contemporary critical "deadlock" emerging out of popular approaches to the representation of death in the postmodern milieu has been carved out by Lee Edelman, who focuses on the operation of the "death drive" in primarily American literature and cinema. Edelman both supplements and diverges from Peter Brooks' still-salient psychoanalytic "erotics of narrative" by changing the frame from a Freudian one, underscoring the desire to draw narratives to a proper close, to a Lacanian one, emphasizing the irruption of the unsymbolizable Real into any narrative space. Edelman associates this drive dimension with "queerness," a term that he productively understands in both its contemporary colloquial sense ("homosexual") and rhetorical sense ("odd," "oblique," "perverse"). For Edelman, queerness, or "sinthomosexuality" (59), can function in fiction as a much-needed antidote to the heteronormative fantasy system of "reproductive futurism" (2), which he characterizes as endlessly displacing the impossible promise of plenitude and meaningfulness onto children, reproduction, and other teleological loci of heteronormative bliss. As my analysis will

demonstrate, there is a great deal to be gained from viewing the texts that I assay as "queer," in the sense articulated by Edelman.

Edelman's vital investigations suggest that through the decline in paternal authority and crisis in masculinity evinced in *White Noise*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*, the texts' "queerness" may be inextricably interwoven with the representation of death and death denial in these diegetic spaces. Edelman's emphasis on the "ironic" dimension of this queer *Thanatos* also suggests that, *pace* Becker, there is a diverse manifold of moods and humours other than "dread" circulating through late twentieth-century representations of death. In his fresh reading of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," Edelman (2013) seizes on Bartleby's occupation as a copyist in a Wall Street law office, which he claims affords the clerk's ironic insurrection against a hegemonic corporate order in a fashion that he claims reverberated through the Occupy Wall Street protest of 2011. This narrative conduit from the occupation *qua* job to "Occupy" protest is replete with import for my project, especially in my account of *Fight Club*, wherein the nameless protagonist stages his own problematic "Occupy Wall Street" protest.

There has also been a recent surge of innovative literary criticism that seems to be more attuned to the thanatotic representational field inhabited by *White* Noise, American *Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*. In *Spaces of Violence* author James R. Giles undertakes a LeFebvre-and-Bataille-informed reading of the spatialization of death and violence in a wide range of primarily masculinist contemporary texts by the likes of Don DeLillo, Brett Easton Ellis, and Cormac McCarthy. In a reading of *American Psycho* that gestures towards Peter Sloterdijk's analysis of the "spheres," Giles focuses on the operation of "work and excess" (165) in Patrick Bateman's occupational universe, marked by a "pleasureless hedonism" (164) meant to inoculate his decadent cadre against the incursion of death:

> Most of *American Psycho*'s male characters fear death, and all their veneration of affluence—their obsession with wearing the correct clothes and owning the newest and most expensive technological devices—represents a desperate and doomed effort on their part to believe that death cannot touch them. (169)

Giles's reading supplements extant "denial of death" optics with a more specific analysis of the way that Bateman's privileged occupational consumer strategy, encapsulating his life in an exclusionary occupational sphere, functions as a phobic response to the inevitability of death. This critical insight emphasizes the extent to which Bateman, the murderous Wall Street executive and normatively "queer" consumer, is both the exemplar of a decadent hegemonic occupation and "castrated" prisoner who obsessively conforms to the programmatic mandates of "the Culture Industry."

Olivia Burgess also brings the occupational sphere directly into the equation, and argues that *Fight Club*'s nameless protagonist's ultimately violent travails must be viewed as symptomatic of his collusion with the "profit-driven and casually murderous corporation" (271) for which he works. Between the numbing effects of his occupation and his homogenous, stultifying consumer habitat, his existence is reduced to a kind of living death: "Much like the mass-produced goods that typify his society, the narrator feels increasingly removed from an unmediated and fully experienced existence" (270). He ultimately pursues an idiosyncratic form of therapy in the form of terminal disease self-help groups, wherein "[t]hese nightly forays into death and dying allow the Narrator to create a fantasy world where he, too, is dying, and by "dying" he is able to continually reembrace life" (270-1). But this turns out to be one of a cascade of death-denying strategies that are anything but "unmediated." As my analysis

illustrates, this is where new media approaches prove invaluable to understanding what I refer to as the "*re-medial*" trajectory of not only *Fight Club* but all of the novels in my study.

The intricacies of the protagonist's occupational situation also play a significant role in Monica Hogan's impressive analysis of *American Pastoral*. In "Something So Visceral In With the Rhetorical" (2004), Hogan levels a scathing critique of Seymour Levov's sanitized, anachronistic pastoral fantasy system, the organizing principle of his occupational habitat, which includes his exploitative glove business and fortress-like Rimrock abode, and, apropos of Edelman, situates his terrorist daughter Merry as a condensation of the death drive, "the traumatic intrusion of reality" (7) into his bucolic unreality: "Stuttering, overweight and eventually murderous, Merry brings the 'stench' and disease of the body into the Swede's 'American Pastoral'" (7). Hogan's trenchant reading of the hypochondriacal dimension of the Swede's deathly aversion towards "the plague America" that Merry represents also opens onto questions of literal and figurative immunity, as systematically expressed by his occupational habitat, and is a vital yet underappreciated concern of all of the texts in this study.

The above survey of critical examinations of the representation of death in American fiction highlights areas for further investigation. Especially significant for this study are the connection to the occupational sphere, the "drive" dimension of death, and the "queering" of hegemonic subject positions. However, it is also necessary to supplement these insights with an understanding of the occupational sphere as a medium. Thus, my analyses of all four novels foreground each protagonist's occupational sphere of activity and scrutinize the explicitly medial qualities of each sphere. This endeavor can be greatly assisted by the new media analyses of Peter Sloterdijk (2009), whose understanding of the "modern" relationship between "terror" and the medial quality of air, for example, galvanizes new perspectives on well-trodden terrain. As I

read *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral* in dialogue with the representation of "the denial of death" in *White Noise*, a rich cluster of generic coordinates emerges. I have developed a reading strategy organized around the mediality of the protagonists' protective occupational spheres. These spheres' vital nodes include not only the job-proper (an issue that tends to receive short-shrift in the criticism) but also the domestic and recreational spheres. As my analyses demonstrate, these narratives unfold in such a way as to expose the violence of the protagonists' often purportedly innocuous occupations. In order to lay the groundwork for an exposition of the thematic, conceptual, and formal attributes of these texts, it will be necessary to clarify this study's next set of key terms, namely "occupation" and "violence."

1.3 Concepts of the "Occupation"

In this brief but necessarily focused survey, I will consider commonplace, new rhetorical, and biopolitical constructions of the concept of the "occupation."

Although the concept of the "occupation" is a rhetorical commonplace, the term is far more polysemic than it is usually given credit for. The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists defines an "occupation" as much more than a chosen career. Occupation refers to everything that people do during the course of everyday life:

> Each of us ha[s] many occupations that are essential to our health and well-being. Occupational therapists believe that occupations describe who you are and how you feel about yourself. A child, for example, might have occupations as a

> student, a playmate, a dancer and a table-setter. ("What is Occupational Therapy?")

In the interests of therapy, the equation of "occupation" with one's job is often construed as prohibitively narrow. This more expansive sense of "occupation," of which the job-proper constitutes but one significant component or node, refers to the whole complex topological assemblage of "pre-occupations," how they relate to each other in time and space, and how they impact upon the lives of those who dwell within them.

A philological investigation into the genealogy of the term "occupation" further confounds conventional understandings. The *Oxford English Dictionary* glosses a complex semantic web around the terms "occupation" and "occupy": first appearing in Latin (*occupare*) to denote "seizing" or "taking possession" and the classical "rhetorical figure of anticipation" (*occupatio*), the term takes on the senses of "tenancy" and "employment" in late Latin and Anglo-Norman contexts ("Occupation"). In addition to the aforementioned, in the 16th century, the Middle French verb *occuper* takes on a great range of signification, ranging from "to hold possession of" (late 14th century), "to inhabit" (1530), "to exercise" (1530), "to fill time" (1530), "to busy oneself with" (*c*1330), and to "invest." At around the same time, in Britain, the verb "occupy" becomes a pervasive euphemism for "have sexual intercourse with," as evinced in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part II*: "A captaine? Gods light these villaines wil make the word as odious as the word occupy, which was an excellent good worde before it was il sorted" ("Occupy"). "Occupation," which harbours political, violent militaristic, and sexual resonances, is still clearly a slippery, "il sorted" term. In addition to one's explicit discipline or career, it has a more primordial sense, referring to all of the ways one dwells, takes up space, or spends time

"during the course of everyday life," how one "grasps" or "apprehends" the world, and even the structural logic that binds these different spheres of activity.

Rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1954) addresses the issue of the occupation as a sphere that functions as an almost meta-terministic screen in the way that it frames the world, affording certain perspectives and occluding others. With this in mind, Burke couples Veblen's notion of "occupational psychosis," which refers not to schizophrenia or mental illness but to the affordance of certain psychic states rather than others, and Dewey's concept of "trained incapacity," the idea that training for one set of tasks can be maladaptive for another. An occupational "… way of seeing," remarks Burke, "is also a way of not seeing—a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B" (*Permanence* 49). Thus, observes Burke, in post-World War II America, afflicted by the "marked instability" (*Permanence* 32) and turbulent changes of an increasingly technological society, specific regimes of occupational training are often rendered violently counterproductive to the individual's goals and interests when the individual shifts to a different environment or the coordinates of the environment change. Just as chickens trained to equate the ringing of a bell with mealtime can be misled by their Pavlovian training, Burke avers, when the experimenter instead uses that bell to line them up for slaughter, so too can individuals —such as speculative investors, physical laborers, or even consumers— trained to engage with the world through a specialized occupational sphere of activity find themselves out of sync with the violent vicissitudes of a diverse and rapidly metamorphosing world. When this happens, "their past training [causes] them to misjudge their present situation. Their training has become an incapacity" (*Permanence* 10). For Burke, with the accelerated transformation of urban America, the occupation is intrinsically bound up with self-sabotage and violence, to which individuals are often unwittingly exposed as a consequence of their occupational psychoses. This

is undeniably the case with the protagonists of all four novels that I examine: Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, the anonymous protagonist in *Fight Club*, and Seymour Levov in *American Pastoral* are thrust into perilous and disorienting predicaments as a result of their "trained incapacity," much of which, I claim, emerges out of their atavistic attitudes towards their medial milieus.

In addition, Burke frames the occupation as a vital node within "diverse occupation habits" that are under pressure to cope with rapid political and technological changes, economic unpredictability, and the need to develop individual coping plans:

> Our nomadism, our vast reversals from year to year in economic status, our cataclysmic shifts in the organization of the nation under war, prosperous peace, and depression, our wide diversification of occupational habits, our total blankness of expectancy as to how the world is going or where we may fit into it all five years from now, the complete disappearance of the "like father like son" attitude except perhaps in our rural districts—all such factors make for individualization of one's typical, or recurrent, patterns of stimuli . . . (33)

Given Burke's configuration of "occupational habits" within the broader synchronic and diachronic national field of economic, political, and technological activity, it makes sense to view the disciplinary matrix for "occupation" as a Foucauldian *dispositif*, "a heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid" ("Confession" 194).

In spite of appearances to the contrary, the "occupation," as an interface between the individual or group and the *dispositif*, is always necessarily entangled in a dense mesh of relations coursing with a great many violent biopolitical currents. Jacques Rancière (1999), who, like Burke, is concerned with habitual ways of seeing and doing, seems to have something along the lines of such a conceptual framework in mind when he articulates the occupational sphere in terms of the quasi-Foucauldian notion of "policing." The police function, here, refers not so much to the operations of police constabularies as to a more diffuse, almost superegoic, prevailing biopolitical ethos that affects and infects certain variably public spheres of activity:

> The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees those bodies are assigned by names to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. It is police law, for example, that traditionally turns the workplace into private space not regulated by the ways of seeing and saying proper to what is called the public domain, where the worker's having a part is strictly defined by the remuneration of his work. Policing is not so much the "disciplining" of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of occupations and properties of the space where these occupations are distributed. (*Disagreement* 29)

My analysis of the "configuration of occupations and properties of the space where these occupations are distributed" perhaps diverges from Rancière here, however, in that there is often

little that is exceptional about "the workplace" node of the occupational configurations that I analyze. In fact, there is a measure of homogeneity to the overlapping occupational spheres of activity— the workplace, the home, and the recreational sphere—that my protagonists inhabit insofar as they are all equally policed and contoured by the same overriding forces, loosely speaking, those of a still predominantly white, patriarchal dominant order under the auspices of globalized, neoliberal late capitalism in the early stages of transitioning into the epoch of what is referred to as "digital capitalism" (Schiller, 2000) or "virtual capitalism" (Žižek, 2008), the all-encompassing, and often violent, subsumption of the world and its inhabitants to the online "World Interior of Capital" (Sloterdijk, 2013).

Also working within an explicitly biopolitical *topos*, Eric L. Santner (2011), in direct conversation with the ideas of Foucault, Agamben, and Lacan, discusses the psychoanalytically-charged significance of the term "occupation," which goes far beyond a specific discipline or form of labour. Santner seizes upon the original German term that Freud uses to denote libidinal cathexis, *Besetzung*, which would actually be better translated as both "occupation" (in the military sense) and "[electrical] charge" (63). This is a remarkably appropriate web of signification, avers Santner, to account for the libidinal economy of the modern biopolitical subject, whose very existence is increasingly subordinate to the dehumanizing "policing" operations of "the administration of bodies and calculated management of life" (qtd. in Santner 8): he is *ex-cited* (summoned, as to a court or tribunal, and called out, which is to say interpellated, but also innervated and agitated) to "occupations," "callings," "forms of life," whose duties he cannot appropriately *dis-charge* (politically, ethically, and also energetically); it also makes sense to say that he is *charged*, in that he is overburdened with superegoic obligations to a structurally-inconsistent and machinic dominant order without any ultimate

authority or metalanguage to negotiate this semantic-energetic double-bind and resolve the insistent enigma of his existence (Santner 64). Santner's approach emphasizes the violent "twitchings of creaturely life" (178) that inescapably permeate all occupations, rendering the traditionally "human" domain monstrous and imposing upon the subject an undischargeable sense of responsibility to and for the world.[1] Like Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, this traumatic frisson is a source of "undead animation" (121) that both violently lacerates the liberal psyche and propels all human dynamism. In both cases, humanity's pretenses of rational agency and aspiration of global dominion are radically undermined not only from without but also from within.

Political theorist Wendy Brown (2006; 2010) articulates the "political rationalities" of a biopolitically-administered world in which the self-authorized rugged individual (an American archetype to which Becker devotes a great deal of attention) has been liquidated and supplanted by a neoliberalized, ambivalent entrepreneurial "speck of human capital" that can only "appreciate" his "inflated" self-esteem by cathecting into wise "investments" (*Walled States* 32). If the occupational archetype of the early modern American masculine subject was the western cowboy plucking himself up by the bootstraps and conquering new frontiers, this new model of emasculated subjectivity is a mollified cross between Kafka's Joseph K and a tremulous *Shark Tank* contestant awaiting validation of his entrepreneurial venture before an invisible somnambulant television and Internet audience. In "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism , Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization" (an essay whose title is powerfully evocative of two of my primary texts' titles), Brown's approach is far from totalizing, however, and she makes it clear that "neoliberalism [is] contoured by globalized capital but given a particular twist in each local context where it dwells" ("American Nightmare" 692).[2] Thus, any exploration of this

economic phenomenon's richly-variegated nuances and effects on subjectivity has to pay attention to specificities of time, place, and situation, a task that is perhaps better performed through narrative accounts than overarching theories that interrogate more generalizeable situations. In all four novels that this study analyzes, the narrative form functions as a vital form of cognition of a wildly unracionative predicament.

1.4 Critical Constructions of Violence

Just as "occupation" is an "ill-sorted" and difficult word to define, so too, many critics observe, is "violence." Cultural studies pioneer Raymond Williams (1976) observes that "violence" is a fraught, multivalent term:

> *Violence* is often now a difficult word because its primary sense is of physical assault, as in 'robbery with *violence*,' yet it is also used more widely in ways that are not easy to define. If we take physical assault as sense (i) we can take a clear general sense (ii) as the use of physical force, including the distant use of weapons or bombs, but we have to add that this seems to be specialized to 'unauthorized': the *violence* of a 'terrorist' but not, except by its opponents, of an army, where 'force' is preferred and most operations of war and preparation for war are described as defence; or the similar partisan range between 'putting under restraint' . . . and 'police *violence*'. (Williams 329)

After interrogating other often equivocal inflections of the term, such as "violence on television" and "violently in love," Williams concludes that "violence" is etymologically and colloquially connected to "violation," "intensity," "vehemence," and "unrul[iness]" (329).

Given the multiple lines of signification that the term sets off, Slavoj Žižek points to the need for a more nuanced taxonomy and epistemology of violence that is sensitive to the status of biopolitical subjects as administered, manipulable objects.[3] One of the medial functions of this biopolitical order is to overdetermine the way that the privileged denizens of the "Developed World" construe the eruption of violence. Žižek asserts that privileged First-World societies are organized around obscuring the extent to which "globalization" is an inherently violent process and the neoliberal "flattening of the world" is anything but a neutral, symmetrical leveling of playing fields. This perpetration of "primitive accumulation" is not, however, without severe consequences. As all of the old coordinates pertaining to geography, law, mobility, communication, and filiation are unhinged and reconfigured, all communities and subjectivities, even those within the densest matrices of privilege, are rendered biopolitically "creaturely," which is to say both bestially subordinated and transfigured into something monstrously inhuman, thereby annihilating "the Great Chain of Being" subtending the ideology of the liberal democratic subject:

> What if the true problem is not the fragile status of the excluded but rather the fact that on the most elementary level, we are excluded in the sense that our most elementary zero position is that of an object of biopolitics and that possible political and citizenship rights are given to us as a secondary gesture in accordance with biopolitical strategic considerations? (*Desert of the Real* 95)

This administered "zero position," this reduction of all would-be-subjects of capital to "bare life"[4] caught up in biopolitically-charged occupational matrices, necessarily affords new phenomenologies of peaceful and violent phenomena. Žižek's launch pad into recalibrating these philosophical optics is Walter Benjamin's (1921) insistence upon the oft-overlooked "mythical" violence involved in founding and consolidating a state. Invoking Brecht's dictum, what Žižek endeavours to bring into relief about the obfuscated state of affairs that constitutes digital modernity is the extent to which, in spite of appearances, founding a bank, is, by an almost incomprehensible order of magnitude, more violent than robbing one.[5] It is perhaps, then, no coincidence that Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* circulates in the background of *American Psycho* as Wall Street executive Patrick Bateman perpetrates phenomenal (i.e., immediate) acts of violence that eerily echo the systemic violence that it is his occupation to perpetrate.

On the issue of highlighting systemic violence rather than sensationalizing immediate violence, Žižek brings Brecht's critique to bear on his analysis of Occupy Wall Street, a pacifistic insurgence against the parasitic machinations of the speculative banking house of cards that decimated the American economy in 2008. Žižek frequently antagonizes mainstream corporate media depictions of Occupy (*Dreaming Dangerously* 77; *Less than Nothing* 1006-7), which he views as a crucible of contemporary neoliberal ideology about what constitutes violence and, by extension, a legitimate occupation. Because the Occupy protest short-circuited the daily phenomenal operations of Wall Street, it was broadly construed as perpetrating a form of "violence" on the status quo. Following French Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou (2007), Žižek characterizes such "divine" upheavals as "Evental" ruptures, groundless collective "truth procedures" for breaking out of the confines of an oppressive and moribund established order, and he accords such fulminations a legitimate and necessary place in the formation and

dissolution of the modern body politic (*Violence* 200). Like Lacan's purloined letter in sufferance, these indivisible remainders of neoliberal and neoconservative violence will, according to this way of viewing the dialectic of peace and violence, never cease to burst to the surface and disrupt the placidity of any institutional form of life that attempts to suppress them. The liberal ideology that would seek to extirpate obvious eruptions, rather than reassess the systemic background cacophonies out of which they emerge, falls victim to a mirage that is complexly bound up with the issue of mediation. In *White Noise*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*, the disavowal of mediality—a wrongheaded aspiration to hygienic communication unencumbered by "parasitic" medial noise—is narrativized and problematized to great effect.

Žižek offers a useful threefold taxonomy of violence–subjective, systemic and symbolic–that strives to take its various visible ("subjective") and invisible ("systemic" and "symbolic") modalities into account. "Subjective violence" is colloquial or easily-perceptible violence. "Subjective violence" includes obvious physical violations, as when one person punches another or an American airplane drops a bomb on Baghdad; it also refers to the obtrusive disruption of smooth-functioning socio-symbolic machinery, as when Bartleby refuses to perform his occupational role as a copyist (*Violence* 1). Deliberately refraining from restricting this category of violence to physical or bellicose violations, Žižek makes the compelling case that the liberal democratic ideal of *laissez-faire* tolerance, a form of life meant to buffer modern subjects against the bewildering incursion of uncivilized chaos, actually amplifies people's sensitivity to phenomenal breaches. For example, when a fellow bus-rider speaks too loudly on the phone or eats pungent "ethnic" food whose odour other passengers find objectionable, some sensitized individuals perceive these intrusions as violations of their "space." As "sovereign," "civilized"

individuals habituate to liberal comforts and protections in their domestic, recreational, and workaday lives, these myriad sensory, conceptual, and affective incursions into their perceived autonomous bubbles metamorphose, emerge to prominence, and even surmount graver infringements on their organismic vitality. Operating within a fantasy matrix that interprets the "zero level" as placid and unperturbed, most Developed-World citizens tend to fetishize this "subjective" intrusion on their equanimity over the more obscure systemic forms of "objective violence" that invisibly undergird every appearance of peace and harmony (2).

The most important and underappreciated of Žižek's subjective-systemic-symbolic triad is "systemic violence" (2), which he characterizes as the pernicious operation of "virtual capitalism" (13), whose speculative ballet callously trounces over people, environments, and economies. As such, it is the corollary to the Lacanian Real of violence. In the age of digital biopolitics, the click of a mouse button in a tranquil New York office can put ten thousand people out of work in Greece in the blink of an eye. Systemic violence works in collaboration with "symbolic violence" (1), the violence that language, *qua* "parasitic symbolic machine[ry]" (*Parallax* 121), always necessarily does to its referents by "posit[ing] meaning while concealing the meaningless machinery of its own linguistic positing" (Edelman 104).[6] At its most sinister, it manifests itself as Orwellian doublespeak that cynically prevents its users from recognizing and revolting against tyranny; but far from being restricted to the conscious machinations of overtly oppressive regimes, symbolic violence is the rule that governs all symbolic codification and social transactions, regardless of how subjectively peaceful they may seem.

Žižek contends that the putatively-tranquil occupation of contemporary office work is a primary site of this dialectic of violence, as exemplified by the travails of *Fight Club*'s nameless protagonist, who stages a self-beating in front of his callous boss, thereby enact[ing] on himself

the boss's aggression toward [him]" within the torpid matrix of "the fundamental abstraction and coldness of capitalis[m]" ("Violence of the Fantasy" 285). What is so profound about this moment for Žižek is the fact that this self-inflicted violence collapses the conventional distance between the symbolic violence of a corporate logic that enacts the cubicle-workstation-bound "closure of capitalist subjectivity" and the flesh-and-blood subjective violence of the fight club. The protagonist's revolt is precisely a revolt against the invisible violence that saturates his occupational form of life.[7] Žižek goes on to dwell provocatively on the extent to which the nameless protagonist's insurgence effects an emancipatory reversal of capitalist sadism, "a relationship of domination," into masochism, the agentive, self-staged "process of hitting back at oneself" (286). This libidinal-economic current pertaining to the pursuit of mastery in an increasingly-alienating cybernetic world is a salient one in all of my primary texts. However, Žižek fails to think through the implications of his own taxonomy and overlooks an essential piece of the *Fight Club* puzzle: the biopolitical and libidinal significance of the protagonist's "legitimate" *occupations* as both a variety of actuarial mathematician whose task it is to quantify the value of life and death (for an unnamed major automobile manufacturer) and an avid liberal consumer.

This oversight is perplexing, given Žižek's own insistence on highlighting the "invisible" operations of systemic violence in the neoliberal administered world, wherein corporate rhetoric is particularly adept at obscuring the violence that facilitates its dominion over the rest of the world's labour and resources. Žižek's favourite examples of this dynamic are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's largest charity, and The Soros Foundation. By figuring themselves as paragons of both "frictionless capitalism" and philanthropy, Gates and Soros

rhetorically obscure and perpetuate the rampant abrasive systemic damage that their corporations carry out all over the world:

> [They] may fight subjective violence, but [they] are the agents of the structural violence that creates the conditions for explosions of subjective violence. The same Soros who gives millions to fund education has ruined the lives of thousands thanks to his financial speculations and in doing so created the conditions for the rise of the intolerance he denounces. ("Nobody")

Through this prism, corporate charity of this variety, though subjectively peaceful, functions as an exceedingly small corrective that insidiously facilitates speculative capitalism's egregious perpetration of systemic violence by obfuscating its rapacious *modus operandi* and, as a result, self-servingly delays its inevitable crises. Žižek's point is not that corporate charity and philanthropy are hypocritical; as a Marxist-Lacanian scholar, he is all-too-keenly aware of the impossibility of occupying an uncontradictory subject-position in the socio-symbolic order. His point is, rather, that, far from being "frictionless," these moments of "subjective" kindness and cooperation are subtended and belied by systemic violence of the most hostile and corrosive variety. This occupational disconnect between systemic and subjective violence is artfully represented in all four novels, but perhaps most acutely in *American Psycho*, wherein Patrick Bateman, the avatar of psychotic corporate American greed and exclusion, argues passionately for world peace, an end to racism and sexism, and compassion for the downtrodden while he wages a violent war on those about whose welfare he is putatively so concerned.

In a more diachronic account of systemic violence, Rob Nixon (2011) offers an intricate and insightful epistemology of this insidious mechanism, which he refers to as "slow violence." In contrast to the synchronic temporality of subjective violence, which is usually figured as "immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility," this pervasive brand of objective violence "occurs gradually and out of sight." It is "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is usually not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Thus, this complex and dispersed imbrication of technological and economic activity, human and other-than-human life, and environmental effects, he concludes, poses immense "strategic and representational challenges" (2) to those who would seek to address it. Even those whose occupations are on the front lines of representing this violence (an occupational station exemplified by Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler Studies) could never aspire to do it justice.

In each of the stories this study puts under the microscope, these "representational challenges" are intricately framed, addressed, and articulated as the protagonists engage in specific occupational strategies to stave off the inevitable crises that threaten to consume them and the entrenched forms of life they inhabit. In every case, the medial socio-symbolic architecture of their spheres of activity proves fallible at contending with their occupations' often caustic indivisible remainders, whose literary depictions, Žižek claims, tend to range from the monstrous to the sublime and radiate out of the unique conditions of a particular cultural-economic moment (*Plague of Fantasies* 160). In *White Noise*, the integrity of Jack Gladney's tranquil college town lifestyle is undermined not just by the infiltrations of the popular mediastream's representations of violence but also by the revelation of his wife Babette's secret life (organized around her dread of death and addiction to Dylar) and the emergence of an

"airborne toxic event" that engulfs their secluded Reagan-era "College-on-the-Hill." In *American Psycho*, Bateman's equally insular corporate-colonized occupational sphere turns out to be every bit as perilous for the denizens of its privileged, hygienic inner sanctums as it is for the putative "filth" it violently excludes. In *Fight Club*, the nameless protagonist's unreflective lifestyle as a cold, calculating recall coordinator for a large, unscrupulous corporation, on the one hand, and nameless avid consumer of corporate-produced goods, on the other, comes to a violent head in the form of Tyler Durden's evolving destructive campaign to render the violence of the capitalist order (and American consumers' complicity therewith), visible and tangible. In the case of *American Pastoral*, Seymour Levov attempts to occupy the received post-war white-Anglo-Saxon bucolic fantasy of plenitude only to beget a terrorist daughter, a counterpastoral "indigenous American berserk" who is implacably driven to tear his delicate imaginary American *u-topos* to shreds.

1.4.1 White-Collar Occupational Identities and Violence

While "white collar" now colloquially signifies the broad band from middle-to-upper-class labour and individuals, especially "[r]elating to the work done or the people who work in an office or other professional environment" ("White Collar"), critical genealogies of the literary representation of "white collar" work and concerns show that this protean class marker has been contested for over a century. Christopher P. Wilson's (1992) *Class and Social Representation in American Literature, 1885-1925* advocates for a brand of class-centric analysis, especially as pertaining to the ever-evolving status of the American "middle class," in criticism of *fin de siècle* American literature. Using C. Wright Mills' (1951) Weberian account of "white collar" work

(as opposed to "working class" manual labour) as a starting point, Wilson positions himself against what he sees as the more popular but problematic stream of conventional postmodern criticism ". . . preoccupied with textual and ideological decoding, often to the exclusion of [class issues]" (9) and instead explores the complex metamorphosis of "white collar" work since the early twentieth century. The strength of Wilson's approach is that, while still informed by postmodern interpretive practices, which forbid ". . . imputing . . . rigid occupational categories, a unified class structure, or a given class consciousness" (7), he is able to conduct an important survey of the role that this malleable middle class category has played in the American imaginary, especially from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Starting with O. Henry's self-identification with the census taker's meta-occupation as "a recorder of a plurality of occupations" and "recorder of the mass" (Wilson 25), Wilson examines the early-twentieth century cultural moment when "white collar" work and "the middle class" began to receive highly-differentiated treatment in popular fiction. This occurs a century before the figure of "recorder of the mass" would resurface in *Fight Club* as a far-from-innocuous agent of "casually murderous" corporate America.

Wilson situates O. Henry's concern with "the common man" and consequent sympathetic treatments of clerical employees, in particular, within a cultural moment wherein the "rationalization of office routines also buttressed by sober traits … [s]utured together a new particularly close identification between the corporation and the employee" (Wilson 33) that spilled out into a multitude of lifestyle domains beyond the job itself. Wilson suggests that popular mid-twentieth-century American writers working in O. Henry's wake (like Edna Ferber, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson) "performed significant groundwork for the varieties of white collar representation to follow" (255). These treatments, which emerge out of constantly

evolving socio-economic conditions, prejudices, and intuitions about what occupations and character traits constitute "the common American" and his or her relationship to their occupation, initiate a representational preoccupation that persists in American letters to the present day. As I make clear in my analyses of *White Noise*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*, each text stages a radical line of influence from the job to the lifestyle and worldview. However, whereas many of the early depictions of white-collar corporation-employee consubstantiation that Wilson discusses are more neutral about the state of corporate America (a nexus bound up with the emergence of a salubrious American middle class), the novels in my study are much more barbed in their representation of an often malevolent biopolitical order that simultaneously perpetrates and satirizes unthinkable amounts of violence, of which the protagonists of all four figure as intensified conduits.

In *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White Collar Work*, Andrew Hoberek (2010) performs a far-reaching analysis of the metamorphosis of the "white collar" domain in predominantly urban American culture and literary representations thereof. Beginning his study on a similar note to Wilson's, Hoberek underscores the frequent obviation of class and occupation in mainstream analyses of canonical texts like Melville's 1853 "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street."[8] After all, Hoberek observes, Bartleby's occupation (scrivener clerk or copyist) and his occupational site (Wall Street) are in the very title. Melville's story is, for Hoberek, like Edelman, as much about Bartleby's occupation in the nerve-center of the capitalist milieu, as anything else, and yet few critics, he points out, deign to make anything of this fact. Seizing on this deficiency in the critical field (which Hoberek attributes to the vestigial but pervasive New Deal interregnum myth of a "classless" nation), he endeavours to exhume the vanishing mediator of class, especially as it pertains to "white collar"

work, in a wide array of twentieth-century American texts in which class and race representations intermingle in ways that antagonize pretenses of American classlessness and, apropos of Wilson's study, the viability of representing an American "common man."

In his account of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Hoberek argues that important race-focused analyses of the text need to be supplemented (but not replaced) by readings that are sensitive to the class issues that saturate a number of "white collar fictions" from the era in which

> a man, anxious to find creative fulfilling mental labor, instead encounters mystified, conformist organizations that threaten to rob him of his individuality, agency, and autonomy. To offer a useful oversimplification, the organization-man narrative gives form to the novel's African American content. (Hoberek 55)

Accordingly, Hoberek avers that Ellison's deviation from the received form of proletarian fiction critically indexes both a scene of fraught racial politics and the growing pains of a period during which ". . . the site of labor was shifting from blue-collar to white-collar work" (55).

In his overview of the "ambivalent" (70) role of the Jew in post-WWII American culture and novels, an issue of paramount importance to my research, especially as it pertains to *American Pastoral*, Hoberek builds on Alfred Kazin's emphasis on the interplay of differentiation and assimilation in the "so-called Jewish novel" (qtd. in Hoberek 70) in order to underscore the role that class mobility plays in this dynamic as well as the malleable and recalcitrant dimensions of "whiteness" within this occupational field. Often, in their capacity as white collar intellectuals and artists, the protagonists of Saul Bellow and Philip Roth's novels (like the authors themselves) serve as problematically white dissidents against the production of 1950's hegemonic white culture:

> In postwar Jewish fiction the Jew becomes the Jewish intellectual because the latter figure simultaneously exemplifies the concerns about alienating mental labor central to the white-collar middle class and retains a memorializing connection to a culture and an identity understood to stand in valuable opposition to the inexorable tide of white-collar middle-class homogenization. (90)

Hoberek is most at home scrutinizing pre-postmodern literature, as evinced by the nuanced critical attention to the contours of this representational terrain in Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* and Roth's *Goodbye Columbus*; he makes only passing mention of *American Pastoral* for its laudable ". . . effort to comprehend a particular sweep of American history" (73).

In his final chapter, "The Postmodern Fallacy," Hoberek performs a reading of DeLillo's *The Names* through the lens of postmodernism's radical divergence from the mid-twentieth-century "preserve of autonomy that would distinguish the artist . . . [who] self-consciously reimagine[s] [himself] as laboring within and through mass-cultural forms and formulas against which [his] predecessors had struggled" (116). But his disappointingly short gloss on *White Noise* suggests that it would make for a much more fecund object of inquiry than *The Names*:

> Unlike . . . *The Names*, which . . . at least allude[s] to the possibility of some social horizon beyond [the] protagonist['s] alienation, *White Noise* eschews even the possibility of a solution to its protagonist Jack Gladney's alienated, commodified existence. Beyond his performance-obsessed worklife, and his family's interpenetration by consumer goods and the media, Gladney can only imagine metaphysical solutions: the glimmer of "splendid transcendence" in his

> sleeping daughter's pronunciation of "Toyota Celica," or the possibility that "the dead speak to the living" through supermarket bar codes. (125-6)

Although Hoberek lays impressive groundwork in thinking through the material coordinates of the milieu in which early post-World War II fiction operates, his analysis starts to lose traction when applied to the more contemporary "postmodern turn."

Apropos of recent developments in new media studies, the next stratification of such an analysis of the material conditions of the production of white-collar identity is precisely the inclusion of mediality in the account. *White Noise* and *American Pastoral*, as well as *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* all explicitly participate in a late twentieth-century medial milieu in which the entire occupational sphere, in the sense I have articulated, constitutes a vital node. In all four novels, this occupational sphere is depicted as prophylactic in that it is meant to shield its occupants from the perceived violence outside its boundaries, but it is always permeable in ways the protagonists could not anticipate or protect themselves from; that is to say, the "preserve of autonomy" does not simply disappear, as Hoberek claims; rather, it resurfaces in the circuitry of the occupational spheres that the protagonists employ to buffer themselves against the encroachment of a classed and raced outside world they perceive as violent or toxic.

1.4.2 White Male Privilege and Violence

It is no coincidence that all of my protagonists are privileged white males who attempt to shield themselves from the forces of alterity. Critical race theory has a great deal to say about the occupational spheres with which I engage. Under the influence of contemporary currents in critical race theory, literary critics Valerie Babb (1998), Jared Gardner (1998), and Stephany

Rose (2014), in particular, all make compelling cases for the value of "critical whiteness studies" in thinking through the representation of race, and especially white privilege, in large swaths of American literature. Sally Robinson (2013), whose approach has a great deal in common with the aforementioned, goes a step further, bringing gender studies to bear on the matter, and argues for the importance of thinking through the representation of hegemonic "white masculinity" in contemporary American fiction.

In *The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture*, Valerie Babb surveys the representation of race and racial privilege in Euro-American history, philosophy, and literature. Guided by important work on the social construction of race undertaken by Ruth Frankenberg and Theodore W. Allen, Babb draws an operative distinction between "white" and "whiteness." While "white" signifies Caucasian racial status (a slippery, socially-mediated designation that is treated as biological fact in spite of its being riddled with *aporias*), "whiteness" denotes an operative "system of privileges accorded to those with white skin" (9). A significant factor in white privilege's occlusion from plain view is the saturation of media representations of normative Americanness with unmarked white characters, "foster[ing] cultural perceptions that only whites have played a significant role in the history of the United States and that only white experiences constitute an appropriate source for artistic expression" (11). Such exclusionary fantasy systems, held together by fidelity to tendentious representations of "loosely strung historical events" (169), take the form of a full-borne "ideology of whiteness [that weaves] together arbitrary traits of hair color, eye color, skin color, religious belief, language, morality, and class into a network of standards against which those it define[s] as different could be measured" (169). Unfortunately, the bulk of Babb's literary analysis is devoted to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*; furthermore, Babb makes only passing mention of Frederick Douglass

and never cites the pioneering work of Frantz Fanon, W.E.B Du Bois, or Paul Gilroy. So her project of speaking to "the meaning of whiteness in American literature and culture" falls precipitously short of the ambitious cultural studies and literary criticism aspirations announced by her title.

In *Master Plots: Race and the Founding of an American Literature*, Jared Gardner conducts a far more extensive genealogical analysis of the literary operation of whiteness as the unmarked, but universally valid, category of American personhood against which racial difference is constructed. In the first chapter, Gardner situates Charles Brockden Brown's imperialist representations of "savagery" in the context of the Alien and Sedition Act; in his chapter on James Fenimore Cooper, he underscore's Cooper's efforts to "distance national identity from the increasingly problematic cornerstone of race" (xv) from which it was being slowly unhinged; and, most importantly, in his reading of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," Gardner points to Douglass' emphasis on the co-constitution of race and writing, a literary-theoretical perspective that anticipates racial theory that would not take root in mainstream American thought until over a century later. Even more so than Babb, Gardner impressively tracks the relationship between historical-cultural currents and literary representations of whiteness vis-à-vis a protean field of different races, ethnicities, and occupational spheres. But Gardner, too, is primarily concerned with antebellum-era representations, so the contemporary frontier receives little attention.

Paul Gilroy (2000) mobilizes a dizzying array of critical theoretical perspectives (Fanon, Benjamin, Adorno, Foucault, et al.) and popular cultural narratives (including the films of Spike Lee and Stephen Spielberg, rap music, the novels of Salman Rushdie, and others) to speak to a

"crisis of 'race'" (40) that ambitiously calls for emancipation from the bonds of not just "whiteness" and white privilege but "from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking about thinking" (40). Gilroy's concerns echo complexly through all four novels. *White Noise* seems to carve out a number of false escape routes from the problem of race. Gladney's occupation, as professor of Hitler Studies, by presenting Hitler on the same stage as Elvis, seems to make a mockery of genocide. By the same token, the "composite" (307) deracialized figure of Willy Mink resonates as an insentient recrudescence of the Culture Industry. The scourge of raciological thought is present on every page of *American Psycho*, wherein the racist murderer Patrick Bateman would claim, at dinner parties, to subscribe to sentiments such as Gilroy's, in practically the same breath as he beats a homeless black man nearly to death for the affront of contaminating his occupational environment. *American Pastoral's* "Swede" would go so far as to genuinely identify with the mission to dispense with race, in principle, up until, that is, his daughter's Fanonian insurrection is turned against his most heartfelt occupational investments.

Alfred J. Lopez (2005) probes the fault lines of such a project to move beyond race by way of a supple reading of Fanon's account of his conflicting desires, on the one hand, to be viewed by a hegemonic white European society as a "man, nothing but a man" (qtd. in Lopez 2) and, on the other to have his suffering recognized through "reparations, equity, [and] payback" (2). Lopez then cites Homi Bhabha's reading of this tension in Fanon's writing, which "exposes both the continuing privilege of whiteness and the hollow sham of the promise of true integration" (qtd. in Lopez 3). Indeed, all four novels stage this "hollow sham" in terms of its systematic subordination of racialized others to a postmodern corporate order that is marked by white privilege; and yet, though these white male protagonists are privileged as a consequence of

the systemic and symbolic violence from which they benefit, they are jolted out of their comfort zones and disoriented by the ceaseless *re-mediation* of what they take to be the bedrock coordinates of their world, including the consistency of whiteness.

In *Abolishing White Masculinity from Mark Twain to Hip-Hop: Crises in Whiteness*, Stephany Rose insists on the importance of "critical whiteness studies" for interrogating literary and pop-cultural representations of hegemonic white masculinity's pretense to universality but, eschewing absolutes, is careful to distance herself from Gilroy's brand of "post-racialism" (8), choosing instead to focus on the important efforts of American white male fiction writers like Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Adam Mansbach to ". . . challeng[e], dismantl[e], and destro[y] [hegemonic] ideas of whiteness" (8). Pointing to Mark Twain's relationship to Southern Plantation culture, Rose describes his 1893 novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as a seminal text in the drive to deconstruct antebellum white male privilege from within by underscoring the ridiculous extremes to which racist ideology is willing to go in order to impute blame to race. In a twentieth-century variation on the theme of the convenient malleability of racial categories for those in positions of racial privilege, Irish-American Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *The Beautiful and the Damned* demonstrate ". . . the non-homogeneity of whiteness and introduce[s] . . . audiences to a system that gradates whites based upon gender, class, and developing notions of ethnicity" (13). This deconstruction reaches its implosive moment, for Rose, with the work of Jewish American writer Adam Mansbach, whose *Angry Black White Boy*, about Macon Detornay, a white American boy who identifies so powerfully with what he perceives to be the Afro-American ethos, absorbed primarily through pop-cultural representations, and is so full of rage towards white culture that he launches a "Race Traitor Project," which attracts white liberals and gangster-wannabes to participate in a National Day of Apology that ends up

degenerating into bedlam. Rose characterizes *Angry Black White Boy* as adding another layer of complexity to the already complex matter of race in twenty-first century America.

Sally Robinson's *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* is one of the first contemporary literary surveys that focuses almost exclusively on the operation and problematization of hegemonic white masculinity in twentieth-century white American male writing and culture. Beginning with the differentiation of white, predominantly Anglo-Saxon Protestant, male privilege as a distinct category of American cultural phenomenon in the 1960's, as indexed in John Updike's Rabbit novels, Robinson explores the unfolding crises of a subject-position in the cross-hairs of 1970's and 80's feminism. She seizes on the extent to which, in texts such as Philip Roth's controversial 1974 collection of short stories *My Life As A Man* and Stephen King's 1987 novel *Misery*, the siege on masculinity is figured as somatic trauma at the hands of crazed women: "The individual authorial body stands in for the cultural body of [normative] aesthetic standards, both bodies threatened by women who are engaged in victimizing white male authors and mutilating the cultural sphere" (17-18). Krister Friday, who leans heavily on Robinson's work, effectively demonstrates in "A Generation of Men Without History" that this is a dynamic that plays out acutely and exquisitely in *Fight Club*. As I show in my chapter on *Fight Club*, Friday and Robinson's observations about the travails and *aporias* of an imperiled white masculinity shed light on the traumatic experiences of all of my protagonists and the "compensatory trajectories" (Friday 7) that these traumas set in motion.

The nascent subdomain of critical race studies known as "whiteness studies" is not without its critics. In "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination" (2001), Eric Arnesen, for instance, expresses concern about the extent to which ". . . whiteness has become a blank screen onto which those who claim to analyze it can project their own [vilifying] meanings" (8). And

there may well be some validity to this assessment. Still, sociologist Jane Haggis (2004), writing in *Borderlands E-Journal*, valorizes the brand of critical race studies scholarship promulgated by Bhabha and Gilroy, in spite of the potential shortcomings that Arnesen adumbrates, for its powerful "ability to name what is so invisible to contemporary 'white' majority societies, the racialised nature of power and privilege, including . . . [her own] structures of knowing," a perspectival shift that she insists is a necessary first step towards reconfiguring the field and creating more racially egalitarian societies. Indeed, the far-reaching genealogical and literary analyses of scholars like Babb and Gardner make promising progress in this direction.

Nevertheless, I find it curious that scholars operating in the orbit of "whiteness studies" seem to be devoting significantly more attention to antebellum literature (for the necessary purpose of framing the evolution of whiteness) and contemporary pop culture artefacts than contemporary American fiction. This oversight is unfortunate, as innovative readings of texts like *White Noise*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral* can do important cultural studies work in tracking the simulacral mediation of race, and especially whiteness, in contemporary American culture. Laying the groundwork for such a theoretical frame, Bhabha (1998) perspicaciously orients the issue in his influential essay "The White Stuff":

> [It is necessary] to reveal within the very integuments of 'whiteness' the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is – the incommensurable 'differences' that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself; the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority. (21)

Indeed, my close readings of the four novels in question point to the extent to which these "integuments" are precisely that: coverings, protective layers of skin meant to immunize the predominantly privileged, white occupational sphere from exposure to excessive class and racial alterity. But, to respond to Arneson's critique of pejorative representations of whiteness by way of an elaboration on Bhabha, all four of my novels demonstrate the fact that there is a great deal to be gained from understanding the invisibly violent protective medium of the occupational milieu as a digital mediasphere and construing "whiteness" as precisely what Arnesen says of it– a "blank [white] screen," but for its beneficiaries' self-projections (or, in psychoanalytic parlance, their constellated identifications). This mediality of "whiteness" is one of the primary lines of identification between all of my protagonists and one of the bedrock generic axioms of the constellation of texts I interrogate. That is to say, in potent critiques of racialization and racism, each of these novels problematizes not only "race" in general, but also, importantly, the very premise of "whiteness" as an *a-priori* of the regime of mediation from which it benefits.

1.5 Closing Remarks: Genre Trouble

My method involves the application of a close-reading strategy to the primary texts as guided by my aforementioned surveys of the representation of death, the occupational sphere, the broad category of violence, the environments and forms of violence that inhere to the white collar sphere, and a perceived crisis in white masculinity. As a consequence, a densely-woven cluster of themes emerges out of the family of primary texts I have assembled. These include the implication of the protagonist and his occupation in systemic violence, the status of the occupational sphere as a medium, the constitutive fallibility of the protagonists' occupational

strategies to buffer themselves against the real and imagined violence of the outside world, and the mediation of violence, masculinity, and whiteness within the narrative universes of the four novels in this study.

One especially significant theme, a kind of meta-theme comprising all of the aforementioned, emerges out of the close-reading and cross-reading of my primary texts and, consequently receives a great deal of analysis in this study. In all four novels, there emerges a concentrated web of associations pertaining not only to health and disease but also to broader questions of "immunity," a term whose semantic and narrative significance merits closer analysis. Perhaps the pre-eminent scholar of this trope is Roberto Esposito (2011), who conducts a survey of the significance of the concept across disciplines and contexts:

> What do phenomena such as the battle against a new resurgence of an epidemic, . . . the strengthening of barriers in the fight against illegal immigration, and strategies for neutralizing the latest computer virus have in common? . . . . In spite of their lexical diversity, all these events call on a protective response in the face of a risk. Whether we are talking about the outbreak of a new infectious disease, a dispute over established legal prerogatives, a sudden intensification of migratory flows, or an instance of tampering with large-scale communication systems—not to mention a terrorist attack—what is presented in any case is the rupture of a previous equilibrium and the consequent need for its reconstitution . . . (1)

Tracking the theoretical treatment of this biopolitically-charged trope—from Nietzsche to Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Sloterdijk—as well as its traction in popular culture, Esposito observes that

> in each of the above examples the risk has to do with trespassing or violating borders. Whether the danger that lies in wait is a disease threatening the individual body, a violent intrusion into the body politics, or a deviant message entering the body electronic, what remains constant is the place where the threat is located, always on the border between the inside and the outside, between the self and other, the individual and the common. Someone or something penetrates a body—individual or collective—and alters it, transforms it, corrupts it. . . . [W]hat was healthy, secure, identical to itself, is now exposed to a form of contamination that risks its devastation. Naturally, a threat of this type is constitutionally inherent to every form of individual life, as it is to all forms of human aggregation. But what lends particular importance to the need for immunization, making it the symbolic and material linchpin around which our social systems rotate, is the accelerating, generalizing character that this contagious drift has taken on for some time now. . . . What frightens us today is not contamination per se—which has been viewed as inevitable for some time now—as much as its uncontrolled and unstoppable diffusion throughout all the productive nerve centers of our lives. (2-3)

As Esposito observes, though "immunity" is often thought of as a primarily a biological term, the term's juridico-political meaning, "protection or freedom from obligation to the community" (*munus* – obligation, duty, service) long predates this sense; the medical sense of the term is a more recent semantic turn (6). Nonetheless, Esposito (2008) avers that the two semantic fields converge especially powerfully in more recent treatments of the "autoimmunitary" spasms of

modern-day America, where the phenomenon of "homegrown terrorism," a motif that circulates through all four novels, has, like cyber-terrorism, rendered the often-xenophobic distinction between "outside" and "inside" impossible (147).

The convergence of and elaboration on these different senses of "immunity" is complexly articulated in all four novels. In *White Noise*, the "malaise of modernity" expresses itself through a rare brand of hypochondria, an acute dread of death that seems to be directly-related to the aforementioned "high definition toxic event" and the coordinates of the new media scene. For critics like Sloterdijk and Žižek, this brand of atmospheric hypersensitivity is the experience *par excellence* of contemporary subjects who are being bombarded with new forms of mediatic stimulation and contamination (both of which constantly open them up to new feelings of exposure to subjective violence), on the one hand, and an inscrutable cascade of information about the deleterious effects of this inundation, on the other.[9] In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman's violent psychosis is figured as a schizoid *narci-schism* engendered by the decadent American culture of vapid hedonism and conspicuous consumption. Bateman is so deluded by his race, gender, and class privilege that he believes himself immune to the AIDS autoimmunitary virus that circulates through the text, and, quite possibly, his bloodstream; here, the integral role of the mediasphere as well as the etymological and conceptual relationship not just between "immunity" and "community"[10] but also, importantly, "communication" and "communicability" serve as useful guiding threads. In *Fight Club*, the protagonist is rendered mentally ill as a consequence of his unhealthy suppression of the systemic violence of his occupation and of the consumer lifestyle that has colonized his libido; his life is so repressed that he experiences it as a kind of living death. But all of the violence that he has organized his life around suppressing bubbles to the surface in the form of split-personality doppelganger Tyler

Durden, who encroaches on and reconstitutes the protagonist's occupational habitat. Durden aggressively renders explicit the violence implicit in even the most seemingly-innocuous activities and consumer objects. Even soap, the immunitary staple meant to establish regimes of hygiene and stave off disease, is turned into a violent instrument of terrorism. In *American Pastoral*, the Swede, in a move that echoes the three antecedent novels, erects an elaborate "pastoral" occupational edifice to protect his family from the toxic encroachment of the classed, raced, gendered ". . . plague America [that nonetheless] infiltrate[es] the Swede's castle and there infect[s] everyone" (86). This infiltration is in small part a consequence of the castle's explicitly medial operations that, in spite of the Swede's intentions, beam in the noxious content that the occupational sphere is meant to keep at bay.

My reading of this two-fold motif of medial would-be remedies across the "occupational violence" genre has led me to articulate this dynamic in terms of what I refer to as "the *re-medial* paradigm," combining the pursuit of remedies for perceived contagions (often associated with noxious raced/gendered/classed others outside of the protagonists' privileged space) and the deracinating remediating effects (and affects) of an overarching mediasphere that ceaselessly takes up, remediates, and transforms everything in its representational sway. Once the process has been set in motion, in spite of the appearance of "the rupture of a previous equilibrium and the consequent need for its reconstitution," the *re-medial* cascade sets in motion an "uncontrolled and unstoppable diffusion throughout all the productive nerve centers" of the protagonists' lives. My careful analysis of the *re-medial* trajectory of each of the four novels in this study bears new critical fruit that is especially of value to critics interested in the currents coursing through the broader family of contemporary fiction to which these texts belong. Importantly, the articulation

of the *re-medial* paradigm through the four novels serves as a powerful litmus test of their participation in the genre or subgenre whose coordinates this study attempts to identify.

In "Genre as Social Action," new rhetorical genre pioneer Carolyn Miller (1982) avers that extant "[r]hetorical criticism has not provided firm guidance on what constitutes a genre . . . . [A] rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" (Miller 9). Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) articulate a new rhetorical vision of genre that is bound up with the occupational life and externalized cognition:

> genres are inherently dynamic rhetorical structures that can be manipulated according to the conditions of use and that genre knowledge is therefore best conceptualized as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities. For writers to make things happen (i.e., to publish, to exert an influence on the field, to be cited), they must know how to strategically utilize their understanding of genre. (Berkenkotter and Huckin 3)

Also working within a New Rhetorical frame, in her close reading of Todorov's (1976) theory of genre, Miranda Burgess (2009) hones in on the issues of rhetorical action and cognition, arguing for the necessity of conceptualizing genre as an "interface" between subject and culture (Burgess 194). When these vital insights are taken in conjunction with Janet Giltrow's (2014) insistence that genres should often be construed as much smaller than the Aristotelian notion affords due to their emergence out of dense, local rhetorical "spheres of activity" (xii), it makes sense to think of my small family of texts as belonging to a genre or subgenre of contemporary American

fiction organized around *re-medial* modalities of "occupational violence." In so doing, we figure genre not so much as an imperious category or rubric but rather as a dynamic form of *semiotic software*, a *rhetorical user interface* that has a great deal to disclose about the currents cascading through the capillaries of "the American thing" at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Such an approach to genre does not aspire to a totalizing frame that accounts for every occupational issue in these novels, nor is such an exhaustive account possible. My aims are quite modest and I hope that this evolving intervention will lay a foundation for the exploration of mediated occupational violence in a wide array of texts, not just those highlighted in this project, and will contribute to future lines of inquiry.

A New Rhetorical approach to the broader genre or subgenre of contemporary American fiction that concerns this study refuses to view these novels as static documents that quaintly describe a particular state of affairs within a narrative universe; instead, they should be understood as vibrant media *téchni* (a term that condenses "craft," "techniques," and "technologies") that not only knock down the rigid occupational barriers obscuring the systemic violence I've discussed but perpetrate an arguably emancipatory form of violence in their own right. Such a rhetorically-informed approach must be sensitive, perhaps hypersensitive, to what is "in the air" circulating through and between the four novels in this study. And it is precisely this insidious matter of the consistency of the air that my analysis of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* attempts to take up and breathe in.

"For most people, there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is."
- *White Noise*

Chapter Two: Gladney's Echosystem: *White Noise* and What it Signifies

Don DeLillo is perhaps the great contemporary American writer of what Peter Sloterdijk refers to as *Homo Immunitas*, the crippled contemporary subject operating within a dense network of immunitary "spheres" of activity, a total media network consisting of elaborate dispositifs that are meant to contain, protect, and channel him while providing a set of optics for comprehending the world and his place within it. According to Sloterdijk, contrary to celebratory doxa about the limitless expanses of digital modernity, today, more than ever, "biopolitics begins as an enclosed structure" ("Crystal Palace" 12). In many of DeLillo's novels and short stories, a young-to-middle-aged, Caucasian American male is immersed in an insular spherical lifeworld: *End Zone* follows Gary Harkness's travails as a student athlete on the secluded campus of "Logos" College in small-town Texas; *Great Jones* Street is about fictional rock star Bucky Wunderlick's disaffected, solipsistic retreat into an unfurnished Manhattan apartment; most of *Cosmopolis* takes place in billionaire Eric Packer's futuristic militarized limousine, which is designed to function as a self-sufficient speculative investment war room, as he travels across Manhattan to get a haircut; *Mao II* is in large part organized around the life of Bill Gray, a hermetic writer who shields himself from the world's scrutiny in a secluded rural cabin; and "Hammer and Sickle" is a short story about Jerry Bradway, a Bernie-Madoff-like speculative investment charlatan who has been imprisoned in a minimum-security prison full of fellow "slabs of burnt-out capital" and "end products of the system" (175).

In the eyes of many critics, none of these stories exemplifies this principle of "the closed-in structures man erects for safety" ("Closing the Loop" 290) and "the tendency of Western man to construct reality in terms of closed systems and symbolics" (Nadeau 14) so profoundly as *White Noise*, the tale of Jack Gladney, a Reagan-era professor of Hitler Studies in the department of "American Environments" at a small town "College-on-the-Hill," every aspect of whose life is organized around disavowing his own mortality in the midst of an "airborne toxic event" that, through the optics of the emerging digital mediasphere, comes to "resembl[e] a national promotion for death, a multimillion dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation" (*WN* 158).

As a consequence of its near-canonical status, *White Noise* has received a diverse array of critical treatments. One of the bedrock issues about which most critics are in agreement is the centrality of Gladney's negotiation of his morbid fear of death in a densely mediated environment, but the critiques fan out broadly from there. Tom LeClair's seminal book, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, characterizes DeLillo as a "systems novelist" in the tradition of Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover, all of whom are deeply invested in the relation between their protagonists and the complex web of institutions in which they are immersed and entangled; critics like Leonard Wilcox and Marc Schuster see DeLillo's novel as an exemplar of Baudrillardian theories of the simulacrum; David Cowart, on the other hand, levels his gaze on DeLillo's inimitable approach to language as it approaches the ineffable, a writerly *modus operandi* which Cowart insists is not reducible to postmodern formulae; John Duvall, Frank Lentricchia, and Katherine Hayles, for their part, attempt to speak to the importance of television and the mediasphere in *White Noise*. Though many of these analyses draw heavily on the likes of Gregory Bateson, Michel Serres, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and Jacques Lacan, Peter

Sloterdijk's work is never brought to bear on the novel. This is in large part because, at the time these analyses were written, few of Sloterdijk's essays or books had been translated into English. Even now, in fact, they have limited currency in American literary criticism circles. Thus, the primary intervention animating this chapter is the pre-eminent relevance of Sloterdijk's "spherological" optics to any analysis of what I refer to as the *re-medial* logic of the occupational universe of *White Noise*.

One of many significant points of co-contamination between *White Noise* and Sloterdijk's theoretical oeuvre resides in Sloterdijk's treatment of humanity's primordial "dwelling" (*Terror from the Air* 61) and "primary media of existence" (50), the air we denizens of the Western world inhabit, breathe in, and take entirely for granted. As though in direct conversation with *White Noise*, Sloterdijk posits that modernity was conceived with the first man-made airborne toxic event, "a primal scene" (27) on April, 22, 1915, in Ypres, Belgium, where the German military forever altered humanity's relationship to its environment by launching the first lethal gas attack on French Canadian soldiers. For Sloterdijk, this targeting of humanity's environment, the vital "atmo-sphere" that supports all of its activities, rather than individual bodies (i.e., by way of gunfire), is the inaugural flashpoint of a techno-epistemic biopolitical epoch whose defining feature is the continuous practical and theoretical "explication" of our enabling environments (16). This biomedial unfolding entails an ongoing reciprocal relation between an accelerating cascade of disclosures about the constitution of "life" and its infrastructure, on the one hand, and the constant emergence of new methods for attacking and protecting it, on the other.

Sloterdijk tracks this unfurling miasma as it, like *White Noise*'s fictional "Nyodene D" insecticide byproduct, takes on an undead life of its own, morphing into the Zyklon A developed

for “peaceful” pest control, the Zyklon B that the Nazis used to murder concentration camp prisoners, figured as vermin carriers of contagions (43), during WWII, and the manifold pervasive assaults on declared enemies’ “acute environmental living conditions” (29), ranging from American gas-chamber criminal executions to the full spectrum of contemporary “atmoterrorism,” including that employed continually by the American military since the Vietnam War. It is in light of these distinctly modern methods for “explor[ing] the environment from the perspective of its destructibility” (26) that he probes what he characterizes as their peaceful counterparts, including the emergence of air conditioning, climate control, and climatology. Modernity, for Sloterdijk, acquires its definition by means of the constant unfolding of this “atmo-spheric” tension, and the prevailing “mood” (89) is irremediably coloured by polymorphous sensitivity to the “waves and radiation” (58) crackling through the atmosphere. Even the most tranquilly insulated air conditioned space never ceases to expose “bare life” to new zones of vulnerability. Sloterdijk writes,

> If, in their history to date, humans could step out at will under any given stretch of sky, in- or out-of-doors, and take for granted the unquestioned idea of the possibility of breathing in the surrounding atmosphere, then, as we see in retrospect, they enjoyed a privilege of naivety which was withdrawn with the caesura of the 20th century. Anyone who lives after this caesura and moves within a culture zone in step with modernity is already bound . . . to a formal concern for climate and atmosphere design. To show one’s willingness to participate in modernity one is compelled to let oneself be seized by its power of explication

> over what once discretely under-"lay" everything, that which encompassed and enveloped to form an environment. (*Terror from the Air* 50)

This *seizure* of agency engendered by the contemporary atmosphere, therefore, radically undermines the Mazlowian pursuit of shelter and protection from the infiltration of one's most intimate spheres—including the self, the domestic sphere, and all of one's occupations—by the miasmatic flux of an intrinsically toxic and inscrutable world.

Literary critics like LeClair, Cowart, Duvall, and Bonca, in particular, devote a great deal of critical acuity to Jack Gladney's irrepressible preoccupation with death, a theme that resurfaces on nearly every page of the novel and achieves paroxysmic proportions when he is exposed to the toxic cloud. One of the few philosophical influences on the novel that DeLillo acknowledges is Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (Cowart 77), a psychoanalytic-philosophical treatise on the myriad mechanisms people deploy for suppressing the recognition of their own mortality "in a world that offers more and more insidious ways to die—and fewer and fewer structures conducive to the acceptance of death" (78). The synthetic theoretical scaffolding that Becker develops primarily out of Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* and Otto Rank's *Truth and Reality* underscores the various modern secular forms of "cultural heroism," or *causa-sui* projects, that humanity ceaselessly engages in and promulgates. These pervasive illusory forms of "normal self-protection and creative self-restriction" (Becker 188) range from the methods employed by "immediate men . . . [who] tranquilize themselves with the trivial" (188) —usually by way of conformity to normative "family values," which dictate the perpetuation of the biological self through progeny—to the vacuous pursuit of celebrity, which enshrines the self-image in a larger social iconographic nexus through which it can continue to

circulate long after the death of the physiological subject (exemplified in *White Noise* by Elvis and Hitler, both of whose cults of celebrity become the formal subject matter of college curricula).

Far from being reducible to a rapid-injection system for Becker's theory, or Sloterdijk's, for that matter, DeLillo's novel articulates itself far beyond these, organizing the life of Jack Gladney through a total media network that in its operational efforts to *remedy* "the sickness unto death" constantly *re-mediates* it and, through a mechanism akin to both Sloterdijk's concept of "explication" (i.e., the ceaselessly unfolding awareness and sensitivity to the precarity of vital infrastructure hitherto below the thresholds of perception) and the Derridean logic of the *pharmakon* and dangerous supplementarity[11] ("Plato's Pharmacy" 154), thereby transmogrifies Gladney's life into a toxic and unmasterable new *dis-ease*.[12] Thus, Sloterdijk's approach to the immunitary mediality of life serves as a useful "supplement" to existing theoretical work, much of which draws upon his philosophical forebears, such as Gregory Bateson, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan, and Fredric Jameson. All of this will make possible a thorough investigation into the primary nodes of Gladney's lifeworld media network: his household and the family life it affords, the televisual media stream, the grocery store and shopping mall, and his occupation as a professor of Hitler Studies (and lay teutonophile) at the College-on-the-Hill.

2.1 American Domestic Media Environments

Gladney's family is one of the primary loci of his protective lifeworld. In *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, literary Critic Tom LeClair, whose Batesonian systems

analysis of Gladney's denial of death strategies takes critical steps in the direction of a Sloterdijkian medial analysis[13], makes the case that, first and foremost, Gladney

> takes refuge from the largeness of things—the complexities of information and communication that surround him—in his marriage and children. He finds in family life "the one *medium* of sense knowledge in which an astonishment of heart is routinely contained." ("Closing the Loop" 290; *WN* 117; my italics)

Gladney himself characterizes the familial "medium" as one of the primary nodes in the media network of the generic American subject's life:

> The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error. Over-closeness, the noise and heat of being. Perhaps something even deeper, like the need to survive. Murray says we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts. Facts threaten our happiness and security . . . . The family process works toward sealing off the world. Small errors grow heads, fictions proliferate. (*WN* 82)

The medium of the family unit both "generates factual error" and "seal[s] [it] off" from the impingement of "hostile facts."

Moreover, the Gladneys have deliberately chosen to erect their immunitary cradle in a town that further buffers them against the encroachments of a hostile world. In LeClair's words, "Blacksmith is small and safe, far from the violence of big cities" (*In the Loop* 143). As Murray

Siskind, whom LeClair characterizes as the novel's pre-eminent postmodern semiotician, frames the matter, the "small-town setting" (*WN* 10) of Blacksmith is ostensibly a place where people can "avoid situations" (*WN* 11) and "sexual entanglements" (*WN* 10). It would seem to be a tranquil vacuum, an outer buffer against the "hostile facts" and insidious "sexually cunning people" (*WN* 11) who could threaten the integrity of the "sealed-off" household. Of course, one ironic twist of this formulation is that Murray, who obtrusively attempts to seduce Babette, would appear to be just such a person vis-à-vis the Gladneys. As such, above and beyond his role as scholarly interpreter of the coded messages, waves, and radiation, Murray is, according to LeClair, the consummate Serresian "parasite" (*In the Loop* 221), the guest who exchanges conversation for food, but also, we might add, the leech (and, in Murray's case, letch) on the integrity of the habitus and conduit of noise into the otherwise smooth-functioning communication network (Serres 144).[14]

While LeClair is astute to point out that both Jack and Murray view the Gladney family abode as, among other things, a sort of systematic refuge from the violent encroachments of the world, it is necessary to view the familial *Umwelt* as a component of a broader form-of-life mediatic assemblage comprised of discrete spheres of activity. In the process of scrutinizing the Gladney family's particular domestic "American environment," Murray approaches the children, which he does "from time to time as a part of his "archeolog[ical]" investigation" into the "otherworldly babble of the American family" (*WN* 101). For Murray, the American family is "open to special forms of consciousness. There [are] huge amounts of data flowing through the house, waiting to be analyzed" (*WN* 101).

This domestic immunitary "misinformation" system that is consistently depicted as being organized around "seal[ing] off" these "fragile creatures" from "hostile facts" (but nonetheless

harbours massive amounts of data for harvesting by savvy environmental semioticians like Murray), is, in fact, deeply integrated and consubstantial with, among other nodes, the televisual consumption that takes place there and elsewhere. On the topic of the family dwelling's sealed-off mediality, Murray muses,

> Waves and radiation . . . . I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring . . . . You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world birth, it welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. (*WN* 51)

Like the American family dwelling that nests it, the "sealed-off" televisual medium — as Murray admonishes his students who dismiss the medium as mere digital "junk mail" (*WN* 50) — overflows with "coded messages" (*WN* 51) and "charged waves" (103) that require scholarly interpretation.

Though both parents clearly emphasize that the family unit is a strategic prophylaxis[15], above and beyond that it constitutes a medial apparatus that selectively filters out material and semiotic incursions on familial serenity. In so doing, by virtue of the very mediality of this and their other myriad "denial of death" strategies, the would-be remedy turns out to be, apropos of Sloterdijk, a more complex toxin that subverts and problematizes the remedial strategy it is meant to enact. The children occupy an integral role within this network. Jack and Babette, both of whom are preoccupied with their own mortality and that of those they love most, are

especially invested in the children's role as insulators against the forces of annihilation. Jack refers to his wife's recently heightened sensitivity to the inevitability of death and reflects on a death-denying strategy which, at first, he attributes to her but then seems to identify as potentially his own, subtly transitioning from the third-person feminine personal pronoun "she" to the first-person plural subject "we": "She . . . thinks nothing can happen to us as long as there are dependent children in the house. The kids are a guarantee of our relative longevity. We're safe as long as they're around" (100).

Nonetheless, as Mary Holland asserts in *Beyond Words: Signifying Families in Postmodern Fiction*, it is primarily the preverbal infant, Wilder, who provides comfort to the Gladneys:

> Wilder captivates Jack and Babette precisely because he remains safely, blissfully ensconced in a preverbal world. Wilder demonstrates his complete innocence of structures of signification and simulation, an innocence which, once lost, can never again be obtained. (158)

In the midst of Wilder's inexplicable crying marathon, Jack recognizes in "an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony . . . beyond that dopey countenance, a complex intelligence operated" (*WN* 78). Jack fantasizes about "join[ing] him in his lost and suspended place [and] together perform[ing] some reckless wonder of intelligibility" (78). Interestingly, Murray refers to Wilder as "a cloud of unknowing," a trope that critic David Cowart finds telling since it is the title of an anonymous fourteenth-century English mystical tract advising readers how to establish closer proximity to God: ". . . if you are to feel him or see him in this life, it

must always be in this cloud, in this darkness" (qtd. in Cowart 22), advises the author. Cowart concludes that "Wilder is the cloud through which Jack and Babette intuit something for which they experience — to use the word favored by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* — a tremendous 'longing'" (22). Importantly, from a mystical onto-theological vantage point, the cloud trope conveys not just access but also obstruction to "the clear light of rational understanding" (22).

Wilder, whose name connotes his prelapsarian orientation towards a refractory postmodern world, may, in many ways, be a source of comfort and insulation in spite of his infantile vulnerability to illness and distress, but the older son Heinrich is a far more sophisticated denizen of the postmodern universe from whose inscrutable complexity Jack and Babette wish to shield themselves. If Jack, however wrongheadedly, identifies Wilder with presymbolic "intelligibility," Heinrich represents sophistical postmodern unintelligibility. As such, he is a sort of Trojan Horse in their insulated "cradle of misinformation." Early in the novel, as he drives Heinrich to school, Gladney has a disagreement with his son about the truth value of their empirical experience. Heinrich, who has heard on the radio that it will rain at night, refuses to acknowledge that it is already raining during the day. When Jack implores him not to "suspend belief in the evidence of [his] senses" (*WN* 23), Heinrich replies,

> Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There's no past, present, or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax. Even sound can trick the mind. Just because you don't hear a sound doesn't mean it's not out there . . . .

> I'm sure there are sounds even dogs can't hear. But they exist in the air, in waves. Maybe they never stop. (*WN* 23)

To this excursus on modern physics' subversion of empirical experience and common sense (not to mention the complex relationship between intelligible signals and "white noise"), Gladney can only respond by pointing to the seemingly obvious empirical evidence that rain is falling on the windshield of his car. When Heinrich responds that he still wouldn't want to have to make the call as to whether it is "really" raining, Gladney conducts a thought experiment, enjoining his son to imagine that a violent man is holding a gun to his head and insisting that he "tell the truth" about whether it is, in fact, raining.

Heinrich, who sees more truth in the symbolic codifications of reality produced by modern physics, attempts to disabuse his father of his empirical "common sense":

> What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone in orbit around a neutron star? Maybe if these people could see us through a telescope we might look like we were two feet two inches tall and it might be raining yesterday instead of today. (23)

Alluding to both Heisenbergian uncertainty ("Is the cat in the box alive or dead?") and Einsteinian relativity, Heinrich's humourous evasions, which continue in the vein of a deconstruction of the concept of "rain," culminating in an ironically prescient speculation that what seems to be rain could be toxic "fallout" from a distant military conflict, undermine his

father's attempts to establish epistemological bedrock.[16] In contradistinction to the state of bliss that Wilder's innocence induces in his parents, Heinrich's deconstructive pronouncements *bewilder* his father, who does his best to organize the coordinates of his life into a stable, self-identical edifice.

Some critics overstep when they characterize the Gladney children as Serresian parasites on their parents' otherwise immunized "modernist" habitat. LeClair, for example, claims that "[w]hen the children's knowledge and questions penetrate their parents' closed environment, the kids become a threat—an inescapable threat, because Babette and Jack have sealed them into the nuclear structure" (LeClair 298). Puzzlingly, however, LeClair would seem to overstep the bounds of what actually transpires in the novel when he cites the Gladney children as "the primary channel by which . . . electronic media, especially television . . . enters the parents' safe domesticity" (298). The issue of the domestic parasite's locus is, in fact, significantly more complex. It is Jack and Babette who have established the family's Friday night television-viewing ritual, much of which, in another ironic twist, involves watching documentary programs that show gruesome footage of plane crashes and natural disasters. And though the documentaries expose the "sealed-off" family unit to every variety of death and destruction, "Every disaster ma[kes] [them] wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (*WN* 64). Furthermore, as my analysis will show, in spite of Gladney's strategic pursuit of immunitary refuges, televisual waves and radiation crackle through every inch of his total media network.

2.1.1 Televisual Brain Fade

There is no *topos* or sphere of activity in Gladney's life that is not completely colonized by the mediastream. Vexed by his own fascination with catastrophe TV, Gladney asks his "American Environments" colleague Alfonse why such programs are so captivating. Alfonse suggests that, violent spectacles alleviate a pervasive syndrome that he refers to as "brain fade" by "break[ing] up the incessant bombardment of information" (*WN* 66):

> The flow is constant . . . . Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes. Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them, As long as they happen somewhere else. (*WN* 67)

Although the disaster footage exposes the family to a broad range of potential disasters, the acute eruptions of violence jolt them out of the torpid "brain fade" induced by their extreme exposure[17] to the noisy mediatic spectrum of modernity. Ironically, the catastrophe programs both presage and mediate the Gladneys' response to the apocryphal "airborne toxic event" that is about to be unleashed not "somewhere else" but on their town.[18] And, once again, remedy is *re-mediated* into poison as the Gladneys' awareness of the horrifying vicissitudes and implications of disasters is ramified and expanded by the very medial balm that is supposed to seal them off from such incursions.

Murray chimes in that this waning of affect [19]

> . . . comes from the wrong kind of attentiveness. People get brain fade. This is because they've forgotten how to listen and look as children. They've forgotten how to collect data. In the psychic sense a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Diswasher All. The commercial has deeper waves, deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of these things. This is why people's eyes, ears, brains and nervous systems have grown weary. It's a simple case of misuse. (*WN* 67)

Neither Alfonse nor Murray can necessarily be trusted as definitive arbiters of the metalinguistic truth of the situation,[20] a position whose very impossibility the novel seems to posit. Nonetheless, the cumulative picture they paint is of a pervasive psychic numbing that can only be counteracted with ever-greater amplitudes of violence. This addictive reliance upon the healing properties of the mediatic "spear that smote them" can only lead to further dulling and deeper dependencies on the innervating powers of catastrophic spectacles. Murray suggests that this "misuse" is a downward spiral from an originary capacity to "listen and look as children." Thus, his theory about prelapsarian access to the inner workings of the media network figures as a correlative and possible corrective to Jack's prurience towards young children's innocence. According to this interpretation, rather than attempting to seal himself off from the universe of complexity by fluctuating between longing for Wilder's presymbolic capacities and binging on mollifying violent catastrophes, Jack should look to Heinrich's facility with the "deeper waves [and] emanations" as a more adroit "high fidelity" orientation towards the media network.[21]

Murray claims that far more of these coded messages are to be found in the television advertisements than in violent spectacles. Indeed, the language of advertising constitutes a paratactic leitmotif whose repeated irruption into the diegetic space—like that of the unattributed repetition of Babette's question "Who will die first?" —figures as a kind of persistent noise in the communication network that infects not only Gladney's consciousness but also the reader's, interpellating and interpolating her into the narrative universe of *White Noise*. His narration is peppered with unattributed paratactic insertions of three-item concatenations such as "Mastercard, Visa, American Express" (*WN* 100) and "Clorets, Velamints, Freedent" (229). In referring to them as "paratactic," I invoke Katherine Hayles' "Postmodern Parataxis," in which she cites Jack Gladney's experience in *White Noise* as an exemplar of the postmodern "parataxic mode of experience," a bewildering juxtaposition of disparate elements, whose lack of coordinating structure makes their relation "polysemous and unstable" (Hayles 398).[22] Problematically, however, though Hayles points out a convergence of the grammatical and psychological senses of the term in postmodern fiction such as DeLillo's novel, she does not provide specific examples in order to elucidate the rhetorical operation of these incursions on the smooth functioning of the text.

On this point, the "entropic chatter" of television talk show banter and advertising language that insistently bubbles to the surface of Gladney's narrative betokens the radical "interpenetrat[ion]" (Wilcox 348) of consciousness and the mediasphere in the world of *White Noise*. Leonard Wilcox writes,

> These "eruptions" in the narrative imply the emergence of a new form of subjectivity colonized by the media and decentred by its polyglot discourses and

> electronic networks. They imply the evacuation of the private spheres of self, in Baudrillardian terms "the end of interiority." (348)

In Frank Lentricchia's words, "Jacques Lacan said the unconscious is structured like a language. He forgot to add the words 'of Madison Avenue.'" ("Tales" 102).[23] As such, television, according to Murray, is a high-bandwidth conduit to "the market."[24] It

> welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound . . . . Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. "*Coke is it*, *Coke is it*, *Coke is it*."[25] (*WN* 50-1)

The television set is, thus, a portal connecting the inner sanctum of the family dwelling to the broader medial milieu, a network charged with waves and information, which Murray would have Gladney (and the reader) engage with critical acuity. It should come as no surprise, then, that the novel represents the supermarket in much the same terms.

2.2 The Invisible Waves of the Market

The supermarket is, according to Murray, both a spiritual crucible and a node in the media network; it is a place that

> recharges us spiritually, it prepares us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data . . . . Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds . . . . It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore . . . . Tibetans try to see death for what it is. It is the end of attachment to things. The simple truth is hard to fathom. But once we stop denying death, we can proceed calmly to die . . . . We can do so with clear vision, without awe or terror. We don't have to cling to life artificially, or to death for that matter. We simply walk through the sliding doors. Waves and radiation . . . . The place is sealed off, self-contained . . . . Here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think. (*WN* 38-9)

Like television and the family dwelling, the supermarket is "sealed off," crackling with "waves and radiation," and serves as a reservoir of "codes and messages." For critics like Wilcox, John Frow, Stephen Baker, and Marc Schuster, Murray's delirious embrace of postmodern culture's information overload underscores his constitutively postmodern Baudrillardian disposition, as opposed to Gladney's atavistically modernist sensibility, an issue that is again highlighted in Murray's seemingly Baudrilliardian analysis of "the most photographed barn in America": "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies" (*WN* 12). In dynamic contrast to Gladney's perplexity, "Murray savors the flux of

images and signs, where the responses of an authentic interior self vanish in the undertow of the simulacrum and where media images and spectacles proliferate, terrorize, and fascinate" (Wilcox 352). To Murray, who accords primacy to the surfeit of images, the barn is supplanted by its mediation: "Once you see the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn" (*WN* 12). Murray recognizes that, as Lentricchia puts it, "the environment of the image is the landscape—it is what 'landscape' has become, and it can't be turned off with the flick of a wrist. For this environment-as-electronic-medium radically constitutes contemporary consciousness" ("Primal Scenes" 315); and, rather than expressing wistful nostalgia for the pioneering lifestyle that the barn, like Heidegger's infamous interpretation of Van Gogh's "A Pair of Shoes,"[26] would represent to a stereotypical modernist sensibility, Murray is keen to dive right in to the simulacral "undertow" that signifies perdition for Jack and Babette.[27]

Many critics view Gladney as essentially an out-of-place anachronism, a modernist figure caught within the coordinates of a markedly postmodern world; this critical strategy goes a certain distance towards understanding Gladney's predicament, but ultimately proves unsatisfactory. Wilcox, for instance, characterizes Gladney's fidelity to a modernist originary "sense" of the noise and energies bombarding him as a fundamental misprision of the "new semiotic regime" (Wilcox 350) of postmodernity and the array of appropriate responses to it. Above all else, Gladney's attempt to recuperate a measure of heroic authenticity in avenging his cuckolding at the hands of Mr. Grey bespeaks for Wilcox a misrecognition of the new mediasphere that he inhabits. Though Wilcox does not refer explicitly to Becker's text, the quintessentially modernist recuperation of "cosmic heroism" (Becker 159) in the face of certain annihilation is one of its central concerns. LeClair suggests that, in bathetically undermining Gladney's opportunity to act heroically, DeLillo may be commenting on the unviability of

maintaining even the semblances of cultural heroic strategies in a postmodern universe (LeClair 216).

The limitations of figuring Gladney as merely "a modernist displaced in a postmodern world" (Wilcox 76) come to the fore in the analyses of Hayles, Bawer, and LeClair. In accordance with Wilcox's characterization of Gladney, Hayles claims that Gladney finally resorts to violence in a desperate spasm to escape the fragmentary disembodiment of this mediatic scene: "the only viable counter to postmodern kitsch is violence. Only violence, preferably as random and brutal as possible, can crack the slick surfaces of fetishized commodification and restore the connection and immediacy that embodiment entails" (Hayles 411). Strangely, Hayles seems to arrive at this conclusion by way of Bruce Bawer's myopically analog critical essay on *White Noise* rather than a close reading of the novel.[28] Tom LeClair draws a similar conclusion, stating, "when family is lost to [Gladney] as a source of safety, [he] succumbs to a visceral obsession with violence" (LeClair 208). As my analysis will show, there are other possible interpretations of the failed revenge scene at the end of the novel. Against the grain of the analyses offered by Hayles, Bawer, and LeClair, who are too quick to resolve the noise in DeLillo's novel, my analysis suggests that Gladney may be at his most postmodernly "mediatic" in his enactment of revenge. But in order to get to this other interpretation, it is necessary to recognize the extent to which his occupation is patched into his media network.

2.3 Occupational *Führerbunker*

As a denial of death occupational strategy, Gladney's discipline, his career as a professor of Hitler studies, is remarkably consubstantial with the other Sloterdijkian spheres of his lifeworld media network. In his nuanced reading of what he sees as a Gladney's primary death-

denying occupations —television, shopping, and work—Duvall gestures towards a mediatic understanding of Gladney's lifeworld. He argues that it is necessary to interorient "the hinged relationship between the supermarket and television" (Duvall 330) as two interlocking zones of consumption "predicated on market relations" (330), and Gladney's occupation as a professor of Hitler Studies (342). One of the implications of this insight, when conjoined with our observations about the other loci of Gladney's media network, is that it behooves critics to look at his occupation through the same lens as the supermarket and television. Though Duvall overlooks this clue, it is essential to note that, like the aforementioned mediatic nodes, the "College-on-the-Hill" is architecturally, geographically, and semiotically "sealed off" from the rest of the world. The town "occupies an ever serene edge of the townscape, semidetached, more or less scenic, suspended in political calm" (*WN* 85). Not only is it buffered from the frenzied impingements of the outside world by the town of Blacksmith, a town with "no natural haunt or attraction" (*WN* 59) within a region that is "free from entanglements," it also functions as its own self-contained municipality, containing its own "food, movies, music, theater, sports, conversation, and sex" (59).

There is further evidence of the high-bandwidth connection between the supermarket and the late capitalist, post-revolutionary university, where, writes Boxall, the "like-minded and spiritually akin" (*WN* 4) affluent parents who drop off their children in an "assembly of station wagons" (4) see only "images of themselves in every direction" (3). Boxall observes, "The ideological and economic incorporation of the 1980's university is such . . . that there is a confusion throughout the novel between the college and the supermarket, between shopping and thinking" (Boxall 123). Therefore, in many ways, "[t]he self-referring, sealed, white interior of the supermarket appears as the university perfected . . . . In this model of the university as

supermarket, the possibilities for [1960's] oppositional politics . . . seem a long way off indeed" (Boxall 124). The crossed wires between the university and "the market" are multiple. On the one hand, the university is a seemingly sealed-off, homogenizing assembly line wherein students can study the stuff of tabloid pop culture (Elvis, car crashes, etc…) taught by professors who "read nothing but cereal boxes" (*WN* 10); on the other, the supermarket —awash with codes and messages—is arguably Murray and Jack's favoured setting for scholarly dialectics.

But if Murray, the postmodern semiotician, is leading the charge towards the university's eclipse by and subordination to "the market," Jack still atavistically seeks to accord primacy to his object of study, from which he derives strength and shelter. Towards the end of the novel, "during a long peripatetic conversation" (Duvall 342) that, appropriately, culminates in Murray's *Lyceum*, the supermarket, Murray diagnoses Jack's use of Hitler as an elaborate strategy against death:

> Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you. I understand completely . . . . You wanted to be helped and sheltered. The overwhelming horror would leave no room for your own death. 'Submerge me,' you said. 'Absorb my fear.' On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength. (*WN* 287)

Duvall seizes perspicaciously on the first strategy that Murray points to, Gladney's use of Hitler as shelter. This comports with the pervasive trope of containment that inheres to the family, the town, and shopping. For confirmation of Murray's analysis, Duvall looks to the moment when

Gladney's father-in-law shows up at the Gladney house unannounced and death-obsessed Gladney, mistaking him for the Angel of Death, instinctively grabs his copy of *Mein Kampf* as though it were a sacred talisman (Duvall 342). Responding to the Chancellor's injunction to "grow out" into Hitler, Jack remarks that "Hitler g[i]ve[s] [him] something to grow into and develop toward" (*WN* 17). Even at his Hitler conference, in order to protect himself from potential accusations of imposture in response to his poor mastery of the German language, he repeats the name Hitler often, "hoping it w[ill] overpower [his] insecure sentence structure" (*WN* 274).

Even within the inner sanctum of his protective occupational sphere, death is ceaselessly in circulation. At the crescendo moment of his antiphonal pedagogical duel with Murray, with each scholar making the case for the prestige due to his disciplinary icon (Hitler and Elvis, respectively), Jack launches into a superficial etymological investigation of the word "death," whereupon he explains that the German crowds surrounding Hitler flocked to him in order to "form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others" (WN 73). After establishing the superior aura of Hitler, whom adoring crowds perceived to be "the *medium* of revelation" (*WN* 72; my italics), Jack concludes,

> I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal, allowing my subject to be associated with an infinitely lesser figure . . . . It was not a small matter. We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very things that made mine untouchable . . . . Not that I needed a

> crowd around me now . . . . Death was strictly a professional matter here. (*WN* 73-4)

Jack's rhetorical fireworks and professorial *ethos* imbue him with the variety of auratic charisma that he associates with his beloved *Fuhrer*. And if his affiliation with Hitler figures him as a seemingly omnipotent "medium of revelation" for the adoring scholarly crowd, this homology also prefigures his fall from grace. When Jack speculates about Hitler's experience in "the *fuhrerbunker*" (72) at the end of his tyrannical career and wonders if he "looked back to the early days of his power" (72), he is clearly foreshadowing the demise of his own mediatic *fuhrerbunker*.[29]

Not only the figure of Hitler, the principal object of Gladney's occupational inquiries, but also, by extension, all things Germanic figure prominently in Gladney's death-denying strategies. To take one of many examples, both of his sons have Germanic names, Wilder (meaning "wild" or "uncivilized") and Heinrich Gerhardt (Heinrich was the first name of one of Hitler's right-hand men, Heinrich Himmler, and Gerhard was the first name of Wagner, whose work was also famously admired by Hitler for its mythopoetic lionization of "the heroic Teutonic nature").[30] When Steffie asks why he would choose to give Heinrich such a loaded name, Jack responds that he thought the name

> . . . had an authority that might cling to him. [He] thought it was forceful and impressive . . . . [He] wanted to shield him, make him unafraid . . . . There's something about German names, the German language, German things . . . . In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course. (63)

At first blush, then, this protective mechanism of Gladney's occupation and preoccupations would seem to confirm the basic thrust of Duvall's analysis. Gladney does use his discipline as a form of protection; but, as both Murray and Gladney make clear, he also uses it as a medium within which to rearticulate—or, as Sloterdijk would put it, to *explicate*, or unfold—himself, "to help him grow in significance and strength."

Like all of the aforementioned nodes in the Gladney media network, his occupation is both operationally sealed-off from its environment and open to the rest of the network, whose operations conduct the flow of his life through its semiotic channels, all under the auspices of "the market." It is therefore with more than a drop of irony that DeLillo has Gladney characterize his self-styled department as an "electrifying success" (*WN* 4). This resonates with Duvall's assessment that

> Each element of Jack's world mirrors back to him a postmodern decentralized totalitarianism that this professional student of Hitler is unable to read. Jack's failure to recognize proto-fascist urges in an aestheticized American consumer culture is all the more striking since he emphasizes in his course Hitler's manipulation of mass cultural aesthetics (uniforms, parades, rallies). (Duvall 330)

In other words, the interpretive strategy that emerges out of Jack's particular brand of hermeneutics (which is, after all, a predominantly German discipline) is insufficiently attuned to the markedly mediatic form of corporate "totalitarianism" that holds sway over his "American environment."

2.3.1 Channeling the *Führer*

Even the proper object of Gladney's inquiries, the Hitler phenomenon, is significantly more medial than he comprehends. Gladney's Hitler, like every other node in his lifeworld media network, operates within the broader milieu of what Sloterdijk refers to as the "World Interior of Capital," which is to say the digital marketplace. Commenting on the ubiquity of Hitler on television and Gladney's use of Nazi stylized propaganda films in his lessons on the group psychology of fascism, Paul A. Cantor underscores the mediatic valences of "Gladney's Hitler":

> DeLillo shows how media representations may dissipate the force of a phenomenon like Hitler, but he also suggests how Hitler himself was able to use the media to build his power. [Gladney studies] Nazism as a theatrical force. The key to the Nazis' success was their ability to stage their meetings, especially for the film cameras . . . . DeLillo suggests that the spiritual void that made Hitler's rise to power possible is still with us, perhaps exacerbated by the forces at work in postmodern culture. (Cantor 49)

It should come as no surprise that, in accordance with the perverse *re-medial* logic that pervades *White Noise*, Gladney's very effort to assert mastery over his life (and death) through Hitler destabilizes it even further. The mechanism erected to shield his life from the forces of annihilation and uncertainty channels it through a new array of cybernetic pathways. To use Jack's term, that which would seal him off from the world is, in fact, "a gateway," reconducting

and *re-mediating* its information and energy in the form of violence as the “power and madness” subtending his aura.

These insidious totalitarian potentials mobilize intensely at the coalescence of these channels. Duvall observes that

> Jack falls into his role as a consumer when his auratic self as Hitler scholar is threatened by a chance encounter with a colleague off campus. Without his academic robe and dark glasses, the colleague notes that Jack is just "a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). This deflation of self puts Jack "in the mood to shop" and the ensuing sense of power and control is immense. (Duvall 337)

Recounting his immersion in the shopping experience, Jack notes, “I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me” (*WN* 84). Duvall sees this as a function of the commutability between Jack’s disciplinary strategy and his consumer strategy:

> Jack replaces his inauthentic Hitler aura with the equally inauthentic aura of shopping, which he experiences, however, as authentic. His sense of power in the mall, a physical space as self-contained and self-referential as the psychic space of television, is illusory for if Jack "rejects" one corporation, another is surely served by his purchases. Jack says, "The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so

> much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit." (qtd. in Duvall 337)

Drawing on Baudrillard's post-Marxian theory of credit, Duvall is especially interested in the transfiguration of financial credit into "existential credit," which allows "Jack, the scholar of Germany's great dictator, [to imagine] himself a little dictator in a benevolent mood: 'I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, baksheesh'" (qtd. in Duvall 338). Trading one "inauthentic" sovereign aura for another, however, does nothing to alter the fact that Gladney essentially remains a "harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy."

2.3.2 Violently Mediating Life and Death into Credit

Jack endeavours to undergo another through-the-looking-glass metamorphosis from ineffectual American consumer into an empowered petty dictator as he migrates from the pursuit of "existential credit" (through consumerism) to what Murray refers to as "life credit," which can only be accrued by way of a violent self-assertion. Murray, who characterizes violence as an exuberant "form of rebirth" (*WN* 290), believes that there are only two kinds of people – killers and diers. By transforming himself from a "dier" into a "killer," Gladney can, at least temporarily, triumph over death through the acquisition of "life credit" (Duvall 341). Duvall observes that Jack is still unconvinced of his friend's "theory of killing for life-credit" (342) until Murray switches gears and enjoins him to access his primordial "dark lake of male rage" (292). Murray asks Jack, "Isn't there a sludgy region you'd rather not know about? A remnant of some prehistoric period when dinosaurs roamed the earth and men fought with flint tools? When to kill

was to live?" (292-3). This "reservoir of violence in the male psyche" (292), according to Murray, can be mobilized to transform an abject "dier" into a heroic "killer": "To plot, to take aim at something, to shape time and space. This is how we advance the art of human consciousness" (292).

In this, Murray's theory goes far beyond Baudrillard's theory of the totalitarian potentials harboured within simulacral consumer society and comes to resemble Peter Sloterdijk's theories about the "fascinogenic" dimensions of the capitalist mediasphere. For Sloterdijk, humans are tamed and domesticated "self-fencing, self-shepherding creatures . . . . [who] must create for themselves rules according to which their comportment is to be governed." ("Rules for the Human Zoo" 25). And within the "zoopolitical"[31] confines of these "air conditioned" immunological enclosures, these tranquil "Crystal Palace[s]" ("The Crystal Palace" 12) operating under the auspices of "psychedelic capitalism" (12) all vectors of a culture, from its architecture to its preoccupations, both domesticate "civilized" humanity (i.e., inculcate it with discursive rules and norms) and channel the "fascinogenic" (i.e., fascistic-mediatic) spectacles in its mediatic entertainment (through television, video games, the Internet, etc . . .). Through this "[m]ediology of the [a]rena" (*Neither Sun Nor Death* 118), in spite of western civilization's "bucolic" humanistic pretensions and intentions, the very architecture of civilization itself, including the very structures humanity erects to protect itself, functions as an elaborate kinetically-charged media network, "a fusion machine of mass culture" (122).

What distinguishes this figuration of digital modernity from many other mediatic paradigms is that Sloterdijk's network channels not only information and energy but also upsurges of violence. In the tempestuous "fusion" reactor of digital modernity, ". . . the arena function takes the lead role, channeling the assembly of the curious on-looking masses into the

spectacle which fascinates and synchronizes" (122). Far from filtering out or sublimating the "deep reservoir" of primal violence that celebratory digital neoliberalism would figure as neutered bits and bytes in the datastream, the ubiquitous digital arena is constantly mobilizing and reconstituting it, causing it to ceaselessly bubble to the surface in the form of rage.

For Sloterdijk, humanity has long been the object of an elaborate mediatic tug-of-war between, among other nodes, the disinhibitory media of bestial entertainment—what he refers to as "live snuff movies" (120), exemplified by the sensationalist disaster pornography that the Gladneys indulge in—and the anthropotechnic medium of the book.[32] That which is most stereotypically "human" (i.e., tame) about humanity derives from an increasingly atavistic literate culture. With the ascendancy of digital media and eclipse of analog literacy, however, Juvenal's "bread and circuses" now course through the very circuitry of humanity's electrified domestic structures, supplanting civilization's *bildung* infrastructure and rendering "posthumanity" mechanistically programmed (in its enslavement to its biopolitical apparatuses) and bestially disinhibited (in its enthusiasm for violent spectacles). In the context of Gladney's media network, all of the structures he has erected to shield him from the elements have rendered him a tame "dier"; but the media network also condenses a bestial "reservoir of violence" that the novel's media semiotician claims he can parlay to his own advantage. In view of Sloterdijk's account of the posthuman admixture of the primitive and the simulacral, both of which Gladney disavows until the end of the novel, a skilled media semiotician would have every reason to anticipate disaster.

2.3.3 Zumwalt

A germane flashpoint of this reconfiguration of Gladney's milieu into a *dispositif* organized around becoming a "killer" who barters in "life credit" is the .25 caliber "German made" "Zumwalt" gun that his father-in-law gives him. As a component of the Hitler node, its primary intended function is clearly to protect Jack from the deracinating incursion of parasitic noise into his media network. As with *Mein Kampf*, he takes particular solace in the artifact's Germanness and views it as the source of "a second reality for [him] to inhabit" (*WN* 297) and "a secret, a second life, a second self, a dream, a spell, a plot, a delirium" (*WN* 254). Given DeLillo's precision with the quantum "physics of language" and Gladney's own insistence on the importance of etymology, it is important to probe the name of the weapon. *Walt* or *Wald* is cognate with the English "woods." In lockstep with the prelapsarian, premodern connotations of Wilder's name, *Zumwalt* literally means something like "in the forest," a pastoral trope that bespeaks affinity with a nostalgic Heideggerian sensibility. But the modified form of *Wald*, *Walt*, which is cognate with the English "woods," harbours polysemous significations that bespeak the mediatic double binds that Jack experiences with all of his remedial strategies. *Kulturwald*, for example, condenses both "forest" (that which precedes and is outside of civilization) and its veritable antipode "culture," referring to cultivated forests.

There is another relevant sense of *Walt* that is homophonic but not cognate with *Wald*; this sense of *Walt* denotes cybernetic *Fuhrer* functions: "to rule, control, determine, direct, command, govern, possess, wield, exercise, cause, bring about." And, as any reader of Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* would know, *Gewalt* denotes "force, power, control, violence." Unsurprisingly, in accordance with the Sloterdijkian *re-medial* structural logic of the network

Jack erects to protect himself from the violent encroachment of the world, "Zumwalt"'s semantic valences rearticulate his tumultuous implication in it.[33]

This *re-medial* logic is further grafted onto the gun by way of the proper name "Zumwalt," whose referent is not German but American:

> in the early years of the Vietnam War, the United States Navy oversaw a massive defoliation campaign intended to destroy as much as possible of the Vietnamese jungles, thereby depriving the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army of their protective cover of tropical forest and exposing them to precision bombing and strafing attacks. Throughout this operation, retrofitted cargo planes sprayed hundreds of tons of so-called Agent Orange over hundreds of square miles of Vietnamese countryside. Not only was the campaign a dismal failure, it also backfired: Many American soldiers suffered toxic carcinogenic contamination through direct contact with Agent Orange. One of these victims was a young soldier named Elmo Zumwalt III, whose father, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt II, was the supreme architect and overseer of the Agent Orange defoliation project. In a television interview conducted in the late seventies a stricken Admiral Zumwalt acknowledged, "I am the instrument of my son's tragedy." (Carter 115)

Once again, the semiotic echo chamber that DeLillo sets up conveys that the Zumwalt that is supposed to ensconce Gladney in an insulated "new life"[34] also—unbeknownst to him — represents an emergent concoction of the myriad dangers to which this precarious life is exposed. Not only does it point to the impossibility of a nostalgic return to a prelapsarian wilderness (a trope, we should remember, that resonates with Nazi-era eugenic nostalgia for the premodern

uncontaminated Aryan fields) but also gestures towards the "airborne toxic event" to which he has been exposed and the "nebulous mass" that occupies his life from within.

2.4 Plotting the Pixels Deathward

Though Gladney sees the gun as a component of a secret plot that will provide him with the "protective cover" of an existential *fuhrerbunker*, the reader should recall both what ultimately became of Hitler's *fuhrerbunker* and what Gladney tells his Hitler students about "plots in general" at the beginning of the novel:

> All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot. (26)

Gladney, for his part, immediately finds himself wondering, "Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?" (26), but an adroit media semiotician has every reason to view the gun plot as yet another *re-medial* instrument of his demise, or at least the demise of his "protective cover," an outcome that may not be nearly so tragic as he would expect.

While barreling towards Willie Mink's hotel, he experiences a succession of altered states of consciousness, beginning with the sense of "dreaminess, release, unreality" (302); shortly thereafter, he recounts,

> . . . around the lightness and dreaminess, something else was building, an emotion of a different order. A surge, a will, an agitation of the passions. I

> reached into my pocket, rubbed my knuckles across the grainy stainless steel of the Zumwalt barrel . . . (303)

As he nears the room, he begins "advancing in consciousness . . . . With each separate step, [he] bec[omes] aware of processes, components, things relating to other things. Water f[a]ll[s] to earth in drops. [He] s[ees] things new" (304). Upon meeting Mink, his enlightening state of consciousness becomes explicitly mediatic:

> I sensed that I was a part of *a network of structures and channels*. I knew the precise nature of events. I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity. Water fell in drops, surfaces gleamed. (305; my italics)

When Gladney self-consciously taps into the media network, he undergoes two concomitant and interrelated enlightenments: firstly, he experiences a quasi-mystical exaltation and becomes—or at least thinks he becomes—privy to "the precise nature of events," a new form of consciousness that echoes Heinrich's absurd scientific optics on the rain and Murray's on "waves and radiation"; second, in a newfangled Kantian vein, as a consequence of undergoing the transition from "dier" to "killer," he extricates himself from his self-imposed passivity towards mortality by accessing the deep reservoir of violence whose fetishistic disavowal he has organized his entire life around.

As Jack approaches "the visceral jolt" (*WN* 308) of vengeance that Murray has promised him, his entire cognitive-sensorial apparatus metamorphoses and he experiences "a heightened

reality" wherein he becomes hyperaware of "molecules active in [his] brain, moving along neural pathways." This "dividuating"[35] psychotropic experience sensitizes him to the "faint, monotonous, white [noise]" (*WN* 306) of the room; apropos of Murray's accounts of the energies coursing through the media network, he perceives "waves, radiation, coherent beams" and "[sees] things new" (308), culminating in a spiritual-scientific epiphany:

> I continued to advance in consciousness. Things glowed, a secret life rising out of them. Water struck the roof in elongated orbs, splashing drams. I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet was. I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of dreams (the waste material of premonitions). Great stuff everywhere . . . . A richness, a density . . . . I was a Buddhist, a Jain, a Duck River Baptist. (310)

Gladney's paroxysmal baptism in the Real is, however, occasionally disrupted by speculation about Mink's racial composition, which causes him to scrutinize his appearance: "His nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter's peanut. What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face? Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?" (307). But there is something fundamentally American about this "composite." Gladney observes "the palm-studded print of his loose shirt [and] the Budweiser pattern repeated on the surface of his Bermuda shorts" (307) with the same curiosity he brought to the composite "ironic, modern sculpture" (258) of his household garbage and wonders how Babette could have seen in this drug-addled lunatic a "last hope for refuge and serenity" (258).

Race and ethnicity turn out to be every bit as mediatic and bound up with death as most everything else caught up in the waves and radiation of the novel. Mink, who confesses to eating the Dylar "like candy"[36] (308), seems to proffer an oblique response to Jack's speculations about his place of origin, which he does not go on to disclose, by explaining just how fundamentally American a "composite" he is: "I learned English watching American TV. I had American sex the first time in Port-O-San, Texas. Everything they said was true. I wish I could remember" (308); again, after some non sequitur rambling, Mink tells him, "I learned my English in airplanes. It's the international language of aviation. Why are you here, white man?" (310). As Gladney, who now senses "[w]hite noise everywhere" (310), gets ready to shoot him, Mink, the composite product of the American media simulacrum, zeroes in on Gladney's race, telling him, "You are very white, you know that?" (310). To this sudden apostrophe, Gladney responds, "It's because I'm dying" (310).

Counterintuitively, however, for someone with Jack's "modernist" disposition, as he perceives his Caucasian whiteness commingling with the rest of the parasitic "white" noise that permeates the media network and the stuff of his own mortality, he becomes a more competent wielder of the cybernetic postmodern milieu against which he has spent the whole novel struggling, and he decides to exploit Dylar's simulacral side effect in order to torment his tormentor before shooting him: he sadistically utters "Falling plane" (309) and "Hail of bullets" (310) to induce panic in his "staticky" American pastiche rival, Mink, whose addiction to Dylar forces him to hallucinate the reality of that which is described by the play of signifiers. Once again, this makes sense within the governing *re-medial* logic whereby every would-be panacea to the dread of death only *re-mediates* this dread, contorting and reconstituting it anew. Even death itself, Gladney realizes, ". . . adapts. It eludes our attempts to reason with it" (308).

Finally, the white noise becomes an enveloping din:

> [t]he intensity of the noise in the room was the same at all frequencies. Sound all around. I took out the Zumwalt. Great and nameless emotions thudded on my chest. I knew who I was in the network of meanings. Water fell to earth in drops, causing surfaces to gleam. I saw things new. (312)

And, in an about-face from his lifelong habitual strategy, rather than retreating from the noise in the system, Gladney, who for the first time sees himself as firmly understanding who he is "in the network of meanings," amplifies it by firing the gun. "The sound snowball[s] in the white room, adding on reflected waves" (312). Marveling at his sensuous psychedelic experience of blood spraying out of Mink's midsection in a "delicate arc" (312), Jack sees "beyond words . . . what red [is], . . . in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity" (312). When he shoots again, the sonic waves reverberating through the room, the jolt up his arm, and the collapsed Mink's "totally white" (312) eyes coalesce into exhilarating "life credit" (312) that imbues his perception with "smashing intensity" (312).[37]

In yet another recursive ironic twist, Gladney's lucid revelation as to the true nature of the universe (i.e. one that accords with Heinrich's and Murray's visions) is only made possible by his willful intensification of the obfuscating white noise in the system through which he perceives it. Even this emboldened attempt to master the operations of the system by becoming one with the violent noise still result in *re-mediating* it, rendering his "snowball[ing]" medial milieu—including his own death—even more protean and unwieldy. As Walter Eid puts it in an analysis that intuitively grasps the mediality of Gladney's sphere of activity, though Jack ". . .

decides, for the first time in his life, to encode a message, i.e., violence, . . . it turns out that even his encoded message is controlled [by forces outside of his control]" (Eid 233). Thus, when, as an unforeseen consequence, Mink shoots him back, Jack's empowered innervation reverts to hapless enervation as his all-too-fleetingly iridescent world "collapse[s] inward, ... [reducing] the extra dimensions, the super perceptions . . . to visual clutter, a whirling miscellany, meaningless" (313), and he reverts back to being an abject "dier." Of course, in the world of *White Noise* there is no regression to previous states without mediation and Gladney may no longer be the same variety of "dier" that he was before his exaltation.

2.5 Narrative Death Drive

The other relevant plot that tends to move deathward is that of the prototypical novel itself. In this, *White Noise* seems to be both theorizing and enacting a narratology whose relation to that proposed by psychoanalytic critic Peter Brooks merits explication. Building on Roland Barthes' groundbreaking work on "plotting" in *S/Z*, Brooks analyzes the fashion in which plot "demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders" (Brooks 4). Riffing on the polysemy of the term, Brooks construes "plot" in the sense of a grave or "burial plot," which is to say a bounded space that literally contains death; in this vein, he characterizes plot as isomorphic with " . . . the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" (22) and asserts that readers imbue stories with meaning by anticipating ". . . the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot" (94).

This overcoding of the "proairetic" by the "hermeneutic" register through the subtle interplay of anticipation and retrospection leads him to associate the structural operation of

narrative closure with the Freudian death drive: "All narrative may be in essence obituary in that . . . the retrospective knowledge that it seeks, the knowledge that comes after, stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death" (95). We read for the Barthesian "pleasure of the text," but that *jouissance* is ultimately " . . . subtended by the death instinct, the drive of living matter to return to the quiescence of the inorganic, a state prior to life" (51). The travails of protagonists such as Gladney sustain what Brooks might call the *com-pulsion* of the text, the forward movement of the plot in tandem with the readerly desire to achieve proper closure, or so to speak. This subtle interplay of forward-moving pulsion (*Eros*) and ultimate closure (*Thanatos*) engenders the libidinal economy of narrative. For Brooks, narrative desire is the desire for the end, but not just any end; it must be an end arrived at by way of the right intermediary path. The reader is driven by the need to circumscribe the unwieldy ambient noise of life within a coherent, bounded, totalizing order. And this drive for order is most feasible and gratifying when directed through the peripatetic detours and repetitions of plot.

At the structural level, Gladney's return to the place from whence he came, his quaint, but toxically tainted, domicile in Blacksmith, seems to map elegantly onto Brooks' "return to the inorganic" thesis. Arthur Saltzman, however, argues that the "loose ends" that remain unresolved at the end of the novel, such as "the result of Jack's diagnosis, whether Murray gets approval for his Elvis Studies centre . . . actually . . . keep *White Noise* from the inevitable deathward progress to which, so it is rumored in the novel, all plots tend" (Saltzman 824, n.10). Building on this narratological insight, Tom LeClair observes, "If the novel appears at this point to drive toward a conventional hopeful ending, DeLillo springs several compacted reversals and ironies in its last few pages" ("Closing" 303). In spite of the *thanatotic* simplicity of *White Noise*'s plot structure, the exigent exodus and return to the domestic sphere from which it all began, the

reader's return to quiescence is no more guaranteed than Gladney's: like Heinrich's rain, the more closely the bounded diegetic space is "explicated," as Sloterdijk would put it, the more uncertain the terrain is rendered.

Literary critic Lee Edelman's critical work on the operation of the death drive within narratives provides a useful supplement to Brooks by opening onto the issue of unsymbolizable noise. Moving from a Freudian frame to a Lacanian one, Edelman builds on Brooks' emphasis on the function of the death drive in narratives. Looking to the Lacanian (rather than the Freudian) death drive, Edelman characterizes the drive dimension of narrative as that which "is unassimilable to the logic of interpretation or the demands of meaning production" (Edelman 9). Rather than conforming to the illusion that it can be docilely channeled towards a properly gratifying hermeneutic closure of the diegetic space, the "white noise" in DeLillo's narrative system resists and undermines the very pretense of hygienic resolution. In keeping with the *re-medial* logic of Gladney's media network, instead of allowing the hermeneutic to overcode the proairetic by simply tying up the diegetic loose ends within a metanarrative enclosure, DeLillo *pro-aerates* Gladney's "sealed-off" lifeworld in a fashion that assures every attempt to impose closure only channels more semiotic content.

Though the ending of the novel refuses interpretive encapsulation, the optics I have developed on Gladney's media network provide a useful frame for understanding the tone of something resembling equanimity that pervades his narration at the end of the novel. In the wake of the failure of his murder plot, Gladney returns to the home front, where a "mystically charged" (322) Wilder rides his tricycle across the highway as horrified onlookers wish they could cause the "scene to reverse, the boy to pedal backwards . . . like a cartoon figure on morning TV" (322). To the car drivers traversing "the modernist stream" (322-23) of the

highway, the vision of Wilder on his tricycle does not make sense: "They knew this image did not belong to the hurtling consciousness of the highway . . . . What did it mean, this little rotary blur? Some force in the world had gone awry" (323). The "modernist" emphasis on the ocular register here is key. In "How the Dead Speak to the Living," Laura Barrett, observing that "speech has all but vanished in the novel's last chapter" (Barrett 112), suggests that words have been supplanted by "the language of waves and radiation." To a go step further, within the narrative universe that Gladney inhabits, the field of representation itself —both in the imaginary and traditional symbolic registers—has been divested of any pretense of anchorage to "the total network of meanings." Any way you slice it, the "picture" of the world presented to and by Gladney is intrinsically dissimulating.

Critics propose a number of explanations, many of which hinge on the modern-postmodern distinction, for Jack's attitude at the end of the novel. Barrett and LeClair suggest that Jack's seeming equanimity towards Wilder's improbable survival, articulated through a transition from dialogue to narration, corresponds to his relinquishment of any "modernist" pretense or aspiration to mastery.[38] This is perhaps why Jack's narration switches, without expression of personal investment in the outcome of Wilder's sojourn, to an account of the family's excursions to the overpass to watch the sublime "postmodern sunset[s]" (227) which have been *re-mediated* by the Nyodene:

> Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dream we don't know what we are watching or what it means, we don't know whether it is permanent, a level

> of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness soon to pass. (324-5)

Viewing Jack's post-gunshot revelation about "the total network of meanings" as a *faux* epiphany, Barrett views his relinquishment of any effort to master the scene as a consequence of his "immedia[te]" confrontation with his own mortality immediately after getting shot; having unheroically confronted his own mortality, "modernist" Jack is ready to receive his aleatory postmodern baptism in the face of the Lyotardian sublime, a transition that is marked in the narrative by a correlative transition from dialogue to narration to intertextuality. This "postmodernist" analysis of the ending of the novel leads Barrett to the conclusion that it must be understood as a demonstration of postmodern parody. As my media-centric analysis will show, however, this emphasis on postmodern parody occludes other important currents from plain view.

2.6 Accessing the Network of Meanings

It would be difficult to adumbrate all of the different noise sources that permeate the novel. One such emitter is the array of oblique, often fragmentary nods to the novel's generic forebears, including the western, the college novel, the disaster novel, the family novel, and the pastoral narrative (Barrrett 100; Johnston 181; Philips 241). Given that one of the working titles for *White Noise* was *The American Book of the Dead* (Barrett 111), Barrett narrows her gaze on the final words of the novel ("The cults of the famous and the dead") and maintains that the previous representation that echoes most loudly here is the ending of James Joyce's "The Dead"

("as he heard the snow falling faintly . . . upon all the living and the dead"), which also, as per its namesake, engages with the mystery of death: "[Jack's] near-death experience allows him to move beyond his paralyzing fear of death just as Gabriel's discovery of Gretta's dead love removes the veil from his moribund life" (111). Barrett's analysis of Jack's mortality epiphany is not without merit, but, given the novel's *re-medial* logic, she is too quick to overlook the novel's other working title, *Panasonic* (a name denoting "all-encompassing sound"[39]), and dispatches his former revelation about the codes and messages traversing "the network of meanings" as mere parody. This is all the more surprising, given her apparent attunement to the paramount role of noise, which she elsewhere characterizes a kind of master trope in the narrative since it includes, among other things: ". . . the incessant mantras of consumerism, the hum of appliances, . . . the static of televisions and radios; [it] also includes the previous texts that . . . contribute to the nation's sense of itself, all the sound that comprises previous representations" (Barrett 112). But it is inherent to the very concept of "white noise" that no attempt to catalogue its qualities, no effort to convert its static into signification, could ever be complete or satisfactory.

Through the lens of a reading that recognizes the role of white noise in the narrative, the final scene of the novel should register as more than mere parody. The scene takes place, appropriately, in the supermarket, where the regular customers are lost and confused because the shelves have been reorganized according to binary codes:

> In the altered shelves, the ambient roar, in the plain and heartless fact of their decline, they try to work their way through the confusion. But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly.

> This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. (*WN* 326)

Perhaps even more important here than the intertextual resonances that DeLillo sets up in this passage are the intratextual ones. Of the codes and messages coursing through *White Noise*, the new UPC codes that supersede empirical wayfinding strategies in the market invoke the secret bank "code" that an unattributed "paratactic" notice informs both Gladney and the reader "allows you to enter the system" (295) right after he resolves to kill Mink; it also gestures towards the "sum total of [Jack's] data" (141) that the SIMUVAC agent calls up on the computer screen to inform Jack by way of "pulsing stars" (141) that "Death has entered" (141). What the UPC codes have in common with the bank codes and SIMUVAC database is that they externalize and *re-mediate* Jack's empirical life, conducting "the ambient roar" through cybernetic networks that, like the paratactic irruptions, take on the biopolitical trappings of the Internet under contemporary conditions of digital capitalism.[40]

Given this chain of equivalences, it is tempting to speculate about the authenticity of Gladney's mystical experience of tapping into "the network of meanings." But if anything is to be learned from the structural logic of *White Noise*, like the airborne toxic event, the novel is a "high-definition event" (138) whose fidelity (to reality, itself, and the reader) is, nonetheless, inherently questionable. It is no more possible to ascertain whether the epiphany is "authentic" (within the fictional universe of the novel) than it is to determine the meaning of the "ironic, modern sculpture" of garbage[41] that Jack scrutinizes, resolve the ambiguities pertaining to Babette's déjà vu (which may or may not be real and may or may not be a side-effect of the

Dylar), or determine the "actual" cause of the "postmodern sunsets" that seem to betoken the twilight of pre-digital immunitary forms of life.

These flickering mirages that Gladney, and by extension the reader, experiences are the consequence of an epistemic shift into what Sloterdijk's German media studies colleague Friedrich Kittler calls "Discourse Network 2000," the reduction of everything, the living and the dead, into streams of coded data. If this state of affairs beguiles the eyes and all forms of representational cognition, it is because "The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences between the individual media. Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface" (Kittler 1), and representation itself is reduced to immaterial "eyewash" (1); what matters most to the network takes place at the level of codes, messages, and noise. In Sloterdijkian terms, "[t]o show [his] willingness to participate in modernity [Jack] is compelled to let [him]self be seized by its power of explication over what once discretely under-"lay" everything, that which encompassed and enveloped to form an environment."

The dead speak to the living through the universal medium, a network wherein all objects of interest can be violently decoupled from their indigenous contexts and brought into resonance with elements—coded messages—with which they were thought to be incompatible in the previous epistemic regime. In a network with limitless storage capacity, the supposedly secular stuff of digital technoscience, religious spirituality, and the flotsam and jetsam of pop culture are shelved in the same aisle according to an algorithmic rationality that resists empirical scrutiny. Rather than vitiating aura, an effect that Benjamin ascribes to the age of mechanical reproduction, the age of digital dissimulation reconstitutes and conducts mystical auras through new pathways, splattering representations harbouring "nameless energies" across the perhaps

diminishingly relevant domain of the senses in ever new configurations ("Tales of the Electric Tribe" 91). It is through these optics that we should view Murray's assertion that he and Jack are "part of the aura" (*WN* 4) because, like "[t]he thousands who were [at the barn] in the past [and] those who will come . . . in the future, . . . [they have] agreed to be part of a collective perception" (4).

Jack's narration itself is another source of "white noise" for the reader. In psychoanalytic-narratological terms, Jack is imbued with a transferential aura on account of his privileged status as the narrator and primary mediator of his tale for the reader. His phlegmatic narration and refusal to engage in extradiegetic apostrophe imbue the narrative with yet another fold of *re-medial* ambiguity. Writing about Gladney's narrative voice in the final paragraph of the novel, LeClair speculates that Jack could potentially be understood to be speaking ". . . literally, . . . suggest[ing his] continuing delusion; or ironically, . . . imply[ing] a reductive reversal . . . or figuratively, which could be . . . a register of doubleness and uncertainty . . . . At the end of *White Noise* the American mystery does deepen, as white space follows Jack's final enigmatic words" (*In the Loop* 223). This litany of tonal ambiguities, in fact, radiates out of every word of *White Noise* and constitutes its distinct mood. As with all of the members of this turn-of-the-millennium American genre whose contours I am attempting to articulate, a seemingly modernist form of focalization is used to dupe the reader into thinking she has a stable foothold on simulacral terrain. The primary interface with the noisy discourse network of DeLillo's novel is Gladney himself. And, deliberately or otherwise (as though such ambiguities can be resolved in this *re-medial* nexus), he colludes with DeLillo in staging an elaborate media network that is every bit as refractory for the reader as he would have us believe that postmodernity is for him.

This universal *echosystem* is the only means through which "life," its spherological-environmental staging ground, and death itself (the event horizon beyond all mediations) speak to the living. If there is anything resembling emancipation from bewilderment within the confines of this toxic network, it perhaps resides in the recognition that humanity's mediatic milieu constitutes not so much a house of mirrors as a murky prism that lights up the atmosphere in hitherto unthinkable ways. And, to paraphrase both Heinrich Gladney and Peter Sloterdijk, maybe it never stops.

"I think he's probably our best living novelist. After DeLillo, I'm not sure I can be influenced by a writer anymore. You develop your own style."
- Bret Easton Ellis

"The . . . ascension of modern mass-culture to the heights of bestiality-consumerism was attained in the genre of *Chainsaw Massacre* movies."
- Peter Sloterdijk

Chapter Three: The Medium is the Massacre:

Smash Cuts and Stereo Types in *American Psycho*

American Psycho, Brett Easton Ellis' early, and still underappreciated, foray into the occupational violence genre, at first met with such a groundswell of controversy—on account of its putatively obscene depictions of sex and violence—that it was largely either lambasted or overlooked by the critical community (Brien 3; Murphet 16; Eldridge 20; Young 88); David Foster Wallace famously characterized it as a ". . . mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything, . . . a sort of performative digest of late-eighties social problems, but . . . no more than that" (Wallace 131).

However, as early proponent Elizabeth Young frames the issue, "Not since *The Satanic Verses* had a book been so poorly read" (Young 88). As a consequence of this uproar of misreading, it is only recently that the fog has begun to part and the book—along with the rest of Easton Ellis' oeuvre—has started to garner the more trenchant analyses it merits. Like *White Noise*, a text with which it is, disappointingly, rarely coupled in spite of the fact that many of the emerging Easton Ellis scholars (Abel, Giles, Baelo-Allué , Murphet) are DeLillo scholars,[42] *American Psycho* is narrated by a privileged white male protagonist, Patrick Bateman, whose

constitutively hypermediatized occupational universe is engineered to insulate him from his surrounding environment, the diseased "outside" of gritty 1980's-era New York City. As in Jack Gladney's universe, this immunizing measure is bound up with a pervasive environmental sensitivity; this manifests itself in *American Psycho* through the leitmotiv of the AIDS virus, a then-newly-emergent autoimmunitary contagion. As my analysis will demonstrate, this auto-immunitary virus troubles the prophylactic logic of Bateman's 1980's yuppie occupational universe, a cloistered community organized around co-immunity from the incursion of the perceived filth of the city. And, most importantly, apropos of *White Noise*, Bateman's occupation is intricately bound up with violence in a fashion that demands nuanced unpacking. Bateman's occupational lifeworld, which is even more densely configured than Gladney's by the mediasphere in which he is immersed, is constituted by a cacophony of chauvinistic voices, resulting in a gender, race, and class identity that Storey refers to as "masculinity with the volume turned up" (Storey 61) and "the ultimate cliché of the 1980's male" (Storey 60), gesturing beyond the generic coordinates of *White Noise* towards the crises in atavistic white, heteronormative masculinity that will emerge in *American Pastoral* and *Fight Club*. Thus, the obtrusiveness of the highly-urbanized, chauvinistic occupational violence that Bateman perpetrates necessitates a nuanced critical analysis, partly-informed by the currents circulating through the previous and subsequent chapters, of the co-implication of work, violence, sex, mediation, taste, health, normativity, and a perceived crisis in white masculinity in Patrick Bateman's densely-assembled "American environment."

At the level of style, *American Psycho*'s kinship with *White Noise* is immediately apparent. Easton Ellis' novel is almost exclusively narrated in the first person (albeit in the present rather than past tense) and focalized through the privileged white American male

protagonist, Bateman, whose highly paratactic narrative, voiced in predominantly in the indicative mood, is, even more so than *White Noise*, replete with lists and the language of advertising to the point where, as Elizabeth Young observes, almost the entire novel is written in "brochure-speak, ad-speak, [and] the mindless, soporific commentary of the catwalk or the soapy soft-self of the market place" (Young 101). Drawing on this insight, Mark Storey observes that *American Psycho* ". . . is deeply mired in the 'crisis of masculinity,' exploring the creation of an identity in a post-modern world in which the concept of identity has changed" (Storey 58). Moreover, by making Patrick Bateman an ". . . exemplar of traditionally male language systems (violence, pornography, the media, fashion, commerce) taken to their extremes, [Easton Ellis] undermines the stability of those language systems and shows the impossibility of their attempt to adapt to postmodernity" (Storey 59). Storey's analysis makes critical headway in appreciating some of the basic coordinates of Bateman's lifeworld. As my analysis will show, Bateman is so ventriloquized by dominant racist, sexist, classist discourses that circulate in the mediasphere that his travails must be read, against the grain of its critics, as a symptom rather than a celebration of their metastases. However, in order to fully appreciate the mimetic logic of the polyphony of mediatic voices being articulated through the character of Patrick Bateman, it is necessary to bring Storey's analyses into resonance with those of Giles, Murphet, and Ferguson, in particular, who, like Storey, bring into relief some of the coordinates of the mediasphere (comprised of consumer guides, advertising, film, television, music, and other mass media detritus) that configure the increasingly violent immunitary operations of Patrick's recreation-centric occupational universe. Above and beyond the crucial observations of these critics, I bring to bear the *re-medial* paradigm—bringing into convergence Sloterdijkian approaches to media and immunity—that emerges out of my reading of *American Psycho's* generic precursor, *White*

Noise; this proves to be an especially useful lens on the operations of the sophisticated media echosystem that constitutes Bateman's highly-unreliable narrative.

3.1 Who Speaks for Patrick Bateman?

Though Patrick is a Wall Street executive at Pierce and Pierce (this is also, not incidentally, the name of "master of the universe" Sherman McCoy's Wall Street trading firm in Tom Wolfe's cynical 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*), presumably in the field of mergers and acquisitions, remarkably, he almost never actually seems to work (Giles 165). Instead, he devotes the majority of his time and cognitive bandwidth engaging in what *Spaces of Violence* author James R. Giles, in his LeFebvre-and-Bataille-informed reading of the operation of "work and excess" (Giles 165) in Bateman's occupational universe, characterizes as "pleasureless hedonism" (164). Indeed, insofar as Bateman seems to operating under the duress of an occupational injunction, it is, as Colby and Storey aver in their more Lacanian-Žižekian readings of *American Psycho*, the Lacanian "injunction to enjoy" (Colby 88), we might even say, emphasizing a different connotation of *jouissance*, "to play or recreate," an impossible mandate to optimize his *jouissance* under incipient conditions of digital modernity. But instead of a unified categorical imperative, Bateman is indentured to a spectral tribunal, an "uneasy chorus of voices" (Storey 61) demanding increasingly distinguished and intense forms of patriarchal enjoyment from the simulacral spoils of 1980's New York existence as Bateman moves about in a continuous "cocoon" (Murphet 25) of limousines, office spaces, opulent apartments, and elite luxury bars and restaurants. The schism in Patrick Bateman's soul, then, his schizoid narcissistic personality disorder, is both dis-ease and cure, within the broader milieu of 1980's New York

City, figured as very much a variant of what *American Pastoral*'s Zuckerman will refer to as "the plague America." But, as is often the case in the occupational violence genre, this cocoon functions as a multimedial ecosystem that only problematically—and far from peacefully—buffers its denizens against the noxious classed, raced, and gendered miasmas of "the plague America."

The novel begins with Bateman and Price, one of many Bateman white male colleague doppelgangers, travelling in a limousine across Manhattan. Price, who is engaged in the same occupation as Bateman (and may actually be one of Bateman's many alternate personalities) is complaining about how much he dislikes his job, for which he feels he is not sufficiently appreciated, which is to say, compensated (though, as this analysis will show, in the simulacrally gluttonous world of *American Psycho*, no amount is ever enough):

> I'm resourceful . . . I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset . . . . I hate my job, you've told me you hate yours. What do I do? Go back to Los Angeles? Not an alternative. I didn't transfer from UCLA to Stanford to put up with this. I mean am I alone in thinking we're not making enough money? (*American Psycho* 3)

The appropriately-named "Price," like everyone else in Bateman's microcosm, views his personal attributes and education only in terms of their exchange value. Cultural, symbolic, and social capital are instrumental to the accrual of and fungibility with monetary capital; "price" and the distinction it accords the affluent consumer are, in Foucauldian terms, the ultimate "sites of

veridiction" (that is to say, of verity, or truth value, and “proper” jurisdiction) of all cultural activity for Bateman and his colleagues, as evinced in every line of the novel. As my analysis will show, in Bateman’s case, given that his level of wealth obviates the need to accrue any more capital, brandishing an absurdly pedantic form of cultural competence, which he equates with “fit[ing] in” (*American Psycho* 237), becomes its own *raison d'etre* and *modus vivendi*.

The passage continues, “Like in a movie another bus appears, another poster for *Les Misérables* . . . . His voice stops, he takes in a breath and then quietly says, his eyes fixed on a beggar at the corner of Second and Fifth, 'That's the second one I've seen today. I've kept count'” (*American Psycho* 3-4). This scene underscores the extent to which their experience of the world around them from within the confines of his occupational universe, of which the limousine is an acute node, is that of privileged consumer spectators for whom everything and everyone is reduced to the status of commodities and consumable spectacles. Through this commodifying lens, the actual “beggars” on the street occupy the same reified position as the play posters for *Les Misérables* (which is, in turn, a musical remediation of Hugo's novel about the plight of the homeless rendered sonorous for the purpose of entertainment), as though the limousine window were itself a video screen and the “beggars” merely avatars. The cocooned limousine thus takes on the trappings of one of Peter Sloterdijk’s moving “caravans” (*World Interior* 120), the kind of mobile immunitary media habitat that vehiculates all intercommunal conquests, from transnational colonialism to urban gentrification (both of which are of import to *American Psycho*), facilitating, in tandem with all of Patrick's other interlinked occupational immunitary spaces, his perpetration of what Murphet characterizes as his full-spectrum "gentrifying agenda" (Murphet 59) on 1980's Manhattan. As such, Patrick figures as a synecdochal embodiment of the

systemic Reagan-Koch-era forces that transformed Manhattan into the playground for the rich that it remains to this day.

This is the first of many explicit and implicit references to Patrick's privileged cinematic experience of his life. His narration is peppered with references to the fact that his experience of the world around him is "like a movie" and mediated through cinematic devices; for instance, once again, in juxtaposition with *Les Misérables*, on his way back from the video store, a central node of his occupational universe:

> Once outside, ignoring the bum lounging below the *Les Misérables* poster and holding a sign that reads: I'VE LOST MY JOB I AM HUNGRY I HAVE NO MONEY PLEASE HELP, whose eyes tear after I pull the tease-the-bum-with-a-dollar trick and tell him, "Jesus, will you get a fucking shave, please." My eyes almost like they were guided by radar, focus on a red Lamborghini Countach parked at the curb, gleaming . . . the Valium shockingly, unexpectedly, kicking in, everything else becomes obliterated: the crying bum, the clouds of pigeons flying overhead looking for space to roost, the ambulance sirens, the honking taxis, the decent-looking babe in the Betsey Johnson dress, all of that *fades* and in what seems like *time-lapse photography* but in *slow motion*, *like a movie*—the sun goes down, the city gets darker and all I can see is the red Lamborghini and all I can hear is my own even, steady panting. I'm still standing, drooling, in front of the store, staring, minutes later (I don't know how many). (*American Psycho* 114; my italics)

Bateman's "time-lapse" experience of the cinematic scene (one that very much anticipates *Fight Club*'s nameless narrator's *re-medial* experience of the world, exemplified by his time-lapse experience of the Parker-Morris Building demolition) sets up a chain of equivalences that reduces everything around him —the "bum," the play (which is, saliently, about the plight of the poor), the car, the "babe," and her dress—to insentient commodity spectacles, all equivalent avatars in the service of Patrick's brutal and voyeuristic exploitation.

In addition to other explicit references to Patrick's experience being "like a movie" (61, 114, 245, 343), there are countless subtler articulations of his mediatic experience of the supposedly immediate: sometimes transitions from scene to scene are effected with cinematic devices like the "dissolve" (8, 24) and "[s]mash cut" (11); when the consistent fabric of his immediate experience breaks down, he sometimes experiences the rupture in "slow motion" (62, 86); and he even later describes an intense sexual experience as a "hardcore montage" (303). Commenting on this *a-priori* mediality of Patrick's innermost experience, Murphet avers that his perceptions and sensibility are so overdetermined by ". . . the technology, economics and spectacularity of film and television . . . [that] most of what he tells us is [likely] a vividly related version of a cinematic fantasy flickering through his own psyche" (Murphet 85-6). What we might refer to as Patrick's "psyche" —including his capacity for attention, desire, cognition, and recognition—is so determined by the mediasphere that, at a relatively reflexive moment about the issue, he acknowledges, echoing and amplifying Jack Gladney's characterization of his family's domestic-medial-immunitary space, that what plays on his television ". . . is [his primary] reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie [he] once saw" (*American Psycho* 345).

3.2 Cracked Mirrors and TV Sets

The first lengthy list of the novel is Patrick's description of his apartment, the interior of which is figured as a veritable shrine to the mediasphere:

> [The Toshiba TV is] a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame) . . . [N]ext to a desk and a magazine rack by Gio Ponti, is a complete stereo system (CD player, tape deck, tuner, amplifier) by Sansui with six-foot Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood . . . . Against the wall is a Panasonic thirty-one-inch set . . . . I'm not sure if the time on the Sony digital alarm clock is correct so I have to sit up then look down at the time flashing on and off on the VCR, then pick up the Ettore Sottsass push-button phone that rests on the steel and glass nightstand next to the bed and dial the time number. (*American Psycho* 25)

This tedious recitation, which underscores corporate brands whose very names signify prestige and consumer privilege, begins with and is dominated by an adumbration of the media equipment (televisions, VCRs, CD players, . . .) that adorns, we might even go so far as to say constitutes, the domecile. The *a-priori* mediality of the dwelling is underlined by Bateman's inability to directly ascertain the time of day, an "immediate" phenomenon that could be discerned from the location of the sun in the sky, but Patrick, who so completely insulated from

the “natural” coordinates of his environs and so mesmerized by the mediasphere that envelopes him that he is propelled from the digital alarm clock to the blinking VCR clock to the phone to ascertain that which should be most immediate about his environment, the time of day.

The mediacentricity of the dwelling is even amplified by the “analog” centrepiece, the David Onica painting, representing a woman watching MTV:

> Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It’s a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, sitting on a chaise lounge watching MTV, the backdrop a Martian landscape, a gleaming mauve desert scattered with dead, gutted fish, smashed plates rising like a sunburst above the woman’s yellow head, and the whole thing is framed in black aluminum steel. The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba. (*American Psycho* 25)

Bateman is presumably talking about "Sunrise with Broken Plates," Onica's representation of a solitary naked woman lounging in front of a television set, set to MTV, out of which an airborne procession of broken plates seems to be flying towards the transfixed female spectator. The painting’s “Martian landscape” setting is ambiguous. It may be an outdoor scene (the earth beneath the out-of-place-seeming media centre is somewhat spherical, with the titular sunset—the only analog marker of the time of day in the apartment—off in the distance), or could just as easily be a barren, hermetically-sealed apartment with alien atmospherics (being represented in something like an expressionist style, hence the contorted “Martian” field). The woman’s

hermetic captivation by the television set and the seeming slippage between off-screen reality and on-screen fantasy gesture towards Patrick's own solipsistic immersion in the mediasphere. What's more, the fact that the occupational centrepiece depicts a naked female media consumer, one whose televisual trance evokes Bateman's mesmerism in the mediasphere, suggests that Bateman's frenetic uptake of chauvinistic heteronormative imperatives echoing from the mediasphere perversely has the *re-medial* effect of emasculating him (that is to say, detracting from his participation in the stereotypical, chauvinistic masculine ideal to which he aspires), a phenomenon that Lacan refers to as "symbolic castration." Later, it turns out that Patrick has, improbably, hung the painting upside down (*American Psycho* 244), pointing to his perverse gentrifying expropriation of the New York "bohemian" art scene, which, like all of the other commodities in his orbit exist merely for his accumulation of prestige, as dictated by the constellation of consumer guides that dictate his taste. But this painting also evinces Bateman's fundamental incapacitation, his "symbolic castration" in the face of the ever-complexifying, heteronomous injunctions of his occupational universe. As Young frames Patrick's situation, "Patrick becomes, in effect, feminized" (Young 119) according his own retrograde chauvinistic ethos whereby successful masculinity equates with forceful, masterful self-assertion. By virtue of the impossible, internally-inconsistent subject position he occupies in the deracinating mediasphere, Patrick is, in spite of his privilege, disempowered in countless ways; his lack of cultural literacy and his passive attitude towards the dictates of the Culture Industry undermine Patrick's sexist ideal gender image of himself.

These Culture Industry prescriptions come to the fore within the same six-page-long paragraph, wherein Patrick transitions to an equally-tedious description of his daily sartorial and cosmetic-dietary regimen:

> After I change into Ralph Lauren monogrammed boxer shorts and a Fair Isle sweater . . . I tie a plastic ice pack around my face and commence with the morning's stretching exercises . . . . In the shower I use first a water-activated gel cleanser, then a honey- almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub. Vidal Sassoon shampoo is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older. The conditioner is also good—silicone technology permits conditioning benefits without weighing down the hair which can also make you look older. (*American Psycho* 27-8)

Here, as elsewhere, Bateman's lengthy account of his meticulous "care of the self" is organized around the injunctions of the advertising industry and consumer manuals, all of which are galvanized by the impossible pursuit of youthful perfection, a normative ideal whose intrinsic unachievability (there is always more he can do to optimize his beauty and vigour according to ever-evolving arrays of consumer options) Bateman's entire form-of-life is organized around disavowing. The cumulative result, what Patrick refers to as his beautiful "mask of sanity" (*American Psycho* 279), is little more than an amalgam recrudescence of the Culture Industry, whose commodifying logic reduces even the markers of racial and ethnic identities—the Finnish sink, the Fair Isle Sweater, the Japanese stereo, and the Brazilian rosewood—to the status of "whitewashed" brand names, mass-produced, homogenized and divested of any trace of alterity, that exist for the purpose of providing prestigious appurtenances for predominantly white American male consumers.

The first person narration then switches seamlessly, Murphet observes, ". . . to a third person/second person singular in the imperative mood, straight from the pages of an instruction manual or advice column" (Murphet 27), as he describes his meticulous shaving protocol:

> You can rinse it off or keep it on and apply a shaving cream over it—preferably with a brush . . . . It also helps prevent water from evaporating and reduces friction between your skin and the blade. Always wet the razor with warm water before shaving and shave in the direction the beard grows, pressing gently on the skin . . . . Never use cologne on your face, since the high alcohol content dries your face out and makes you look older. One should use an alcohol-free antibacterial toner with a water-moistened cotton ball to normalize the skin . . . . Next apply Gel Appaisant, also made by Pour Hommes, which is an excellent, soothing skin lotion. If the face seems dry and flaky—which makes it look dull and older—use a clarifying lotion that removes flakes and uncovers fine skin (it can also make your tan look darker). Then apply an anti-aging eye balm (Baume Des Yeux) followed by a final moisturizing "protective" lotion. A scalp-programming lotion is used after I towel my hair dry. (*American Psycho* 28)

"The general here," observes Murphet, "has absorbed the particular to such an extent that all vestiges of 'Patrick' have vanished in the veneer of promotion" (Murphet 27). Even Patrick's most intimate monologues are always-already constituted by the manifold mandates of the Culture Industry, as conveyed through advertisements, fashion magazines, and consumer manuals. Patrick's "inner life" is so colonized by "glaring product placement [that] . . . . [t]he

adjectives used for Gel Appaisant ('excellent, soothing') are much more lively and human than those used for people in the text" (Murphet 27) just as aesthetically-pleasing veneers (at least, according to the optics provided by the Culture Industry) are privileged over substance. To go one step beyond Murphet here, we can say that when Patrick refers to his "scalp-programming" lotion (yet another phrase that he passively absorbs from product packaging), "programming" should be taken in the intended sense of "training" and also the digital sense (as in "computer programming"): his appearance is literally being modelled and dictated (and his personality is *fashioned*) by the anonymous algorithms of the Culture Industry. Patrick, the avid consumer, becomes so preoccupied with the narcissistic consumer fantasy of indefinite youth and virility (i.e. denying death) that his "inner life" all-but-vanishes in the ever-ramifying frenzy to "save face."

3.3 Disavowing Death

As in *White Noise*, the "denial of death" motif is paramount. Giles writes that most of the male characters in *American Psycho* " . . . fear death, and all their veneration of affluence—their obsession with wearing the correct clothes and owning the newest and most expensive technological devices—represents a desperate and doomed effort on their part to believe that death cannot touch them" (Giles 169). All of this compulsive acuity and purchasing power being mobilized to resist the aging process and anything that "make[s] you look older" extends even to Bateman's food and media diets:

> I pull the Fair Isle sweater back on . . . then head into the living room and put the new Talking Heads in the CD player, but it starts to digitally skip so I take it out and put in a CD laser lens cleaner. The laser lens is very sensitive, and subject to interference from dust or dirt or smoke or pollutants or moisture, and a dirty one can inaccurately read CDs, making for false starts, inaudible passages, digital skipping, speed changes and general distortion; the lens cleaner has a cleaning brush that automatically aligns with the lens then the disk spins to remove residue and particles. When I put the Talking Heads CD back in it plays smoothly. I retrieve the copy of USA Today . . . and bring it with me into the kitchen where I take two Advil, a multivitamin and a potassium tablet, washing them down with a large bottle of Evian water since the maid, an elderly Chinese woman, forgot to turn the dishwasher on when she left yesterday. (*American Psycho* 28)

Patrick's experience, his fastidious efforts to purge his diet—which consists, in large part, of micromanaged doses of vitamins and pharmaceutics commingled with bottled water and hygenically-ethnicized pseudo avant-garde restaurant fare (preferably in a smoke-free restaurant)—and environment of every variety of toxin and impurity, extend even to his Talking Heads CD, another sign of the intrinsic mediality of his innermost experience.[43] And, once again, as with the Haitian cabbie, the presence of the racialized, gendered poor (in the form of the Chinese maid whose supposed ineptitude he blames for the absence of clean dishes in his otherwise sanitized abode) is bound up with an almost eugenic occupational racial hygiene problem, Patrick's own unique brand of cultural conservatism.

Against the backdrop of Patrick's elaborate preparation, the television plays *The Patty Winters Show*, a seeming-parody of sensationalistic talk shows like *Geraldo* (1987-98), *The Morton Downey, Jr. Show* (1987-89), *The Maury Povich Show* (1991-present), and *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991-present). This episode is about women with multiple personalities:

> A nondescript overweight older woman is on the screen and Patty's voice is heard asking, "Well, is it schizophrenia or what's the deal? Tell us."
>
> "No, oh no. Multiple personalities are not schizophrenics," the woman says, shaking her head. "We are not dangerous." . . . . A *cut* to the audience —a housewife's worried face; before she notices herself on the monitor, it cuts back to the multiple-personality woman . . . . A long pause. The camera *cuts* to a close-up of a stunned housewife shaking her head, another housewife whispering something to her. (*American Psycho* 29; my italics)

Throughout the novel, *The Patty Winters Show*—running the gamut from coverage of the kind of banal health and diet topics that preoccupy Bateman to increasingly absurd and sensationalistic coverage of celebrities, serial killers, and imaginary creatures—serves as both an echo-chamber and reservoir of Patrick's "internal" experience. This, the first mention of the show, drops a hint that Patrick suffers from some kind of multiple personality disorder. Furthermore, the very structure of the show, its cinematography punctuated by rapid "cuts," echoes and constitutes Patrick's own cognitive cinematography. Thus, *The Patty Winters Show* is not so much extrinsic noise as an *extimate*[44] mediation of Patrick's "innermost" preoccupations, all of which are constituted by the mediasphere. It is, then, no mere coincidence that Patrick watches a *Patty*

Winters Show about "real life Rambos," rents *Rambo* videos, and then, while on the run from the NYPD, transitions into the third-person to characterize his (real or imagined) Rambo-like shoot-out with the police:

> . . . the cops now, right here, don't bother with warnings anymore, they just start shooting and he returns their gunfire from his belly, getting a glimpse of both cops behind the open doors of the squad car, guns flashing like in a movie and this makes Patrick realize he's involved in an actual gunfight of sorts, that he's trying to dodge bullets, that the dream threatens to break, is gone, that he's not aiming carefully, just obliviously returning gunfire, lying there, when a stray bullet, sixth in a new round, hits the gas tank of the police car, the headlights dim before it bursts apart, sending a fireball billowing up into the darkness, the bulb of a streetlamp above it exploding unexpectedly in a burst of yellow-green sparks, flames washing over the bodies of the policemen both living and dead, shattering all the windows of Lotus Blossom, Patrick's ears ringing . . . (*American Psycho* 350)

No longer attributed to his subjectively focalized position, Patrick's experience is no longer merely "like a movie." The very "idea of Patrick Bateman" is so engulfed, infiltrated, and constituted by the media that it reproduces itself as a film. The unlikely outcome of this imbroglio—the murders and the police chase—like the medial ecology out of which it has emerged, gestures, like so much else in the novel, in the direction of its hallucinatory status.

3.4 A Taste for Violence

At a gathering with his friends at a favourite hangout, Harry's, Bateman launches into a description of his and his friends' attire:

> I'm wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds. Once inside Harry's we spot David Van Patten and Craig McDermott at a table up front. Van Patten is wearing a double-breasted wool and silk sport coat, button-fly wool and silk trousers with inverted pleats by Mario Valentino, a cotton shirt by Gitman Brothers, a polka-dot silk tie by Bill Blass and leather shoes from Brooks Brothers. McDermott is wearing a woven-linen suit with pleated trousers, a button-down cotton and linen shirt by Basile, a silk tie by Joseph Abboud and ostrich loafers from Susan Bennis Warren Edwards. (*American Psycho* 31)

Bateman's description of his friends' name-brand business attire (which is almost identical to his own) occupies significantly more space than any ensuing description of their personalities or careers. Clothing is also the subject matter that Price, McDermott, and Van Patten are avidly discussing when Bateman arrives on the scene. The friends are deeply and unironically embroiled in an intricate fashion quandary about tasseled loafers, which they are writing in to *GQ Magazine*'s "Style Guy" to adjudicate, but Bateman intervenes, employing his encyclopedic

knowledge of sartorial etiquette (gleaned from consumer manuals and fashion magazines) to answer the question.

Commenting on Bateman's fetishization of clothing (a motif that reverberates through *American Pastoral* and *Fight Club*), in *Pornography, the Theory*, Frances Ferguson observes that when Patrick encounters individuals, "he knows them by their names, but he also knows them by the names of all the elements of their wardrobes . . ." (Ferguson 147). Ferguson continues, ". . . it's not so much that he's briefly interested in the clothes so that he can get past them, but rather that he compulsively treats people's clothes as if they were a new layer of skin" (147). In his superficial bubbleworld, ". . . clothes don't make the man; they show that nothing makes a modern man . . . . They are the skin's skin, the attractiveness of appearance with nothing under it. In this reverse striptease, clothes aren't taken off to reveal skin; skin is a sexual organ . . . that becomes more intensely sexualized as it accrues new layers" (Ferguson147). Against the hair-trigger response that *American Psycho* is derivatively pornographic, which is to say a malignly objectifying representation of violence and sex that should be censured or censored, Ferguson posits that the bulk of the novel actually engages in a remarkably sophisticated reversal of the conventional coordinates of pornography. The erotic intensification of these "second skin[s]," like Patrick's concern about the well-being of his Talking Heads CD, externalizes the libido into consumer appurtenances and apparatuses to such an extent that the stereotypical "pornographic" drive to unveil the naked thing-in-itself is obviated. Even when Patrick does seek to undress his victims, it is to flatten them out and render depth into surface. According to the novel's amplified consumer logic of supplementarity, these manifold corporate-branded layers supplant not only, in large part, the underlying body but also the individual subjectivity and its capacity for interiority. Patrick, through this prism, murders interiors and turns them inside out, making them into

nothing but surfaces onto which he can project his rapacious patriarchal media consumer fantasies.

But Ferguson's insights must be conjoined with a "spherological" approach to the insularity of Patrick's social matrix, the fact that all this takes place within the insulated interconnected media interiors—exclusionary spaces like the exclusive restaurant, expensive condominium complex, and limousine—of Patrick's occupational "sphere" of activity because these very same immunitary habitats, these safe zones whose raison d'etre is to protect their affluent denizens from the dangers presented by the city's ungentrified "Raw Space,"[45] also facilitate and safeguard the perpetration of violence that would not otherwise be possible. That is to say, a proper topology of the novel recognizes that Patrick can only reduce others and himself to pure surface from within the deep hollow of the thickly-insulated mediasphere that envelopes everything in his occupational life.

3.5 Extreme Perceptibility

At Harry's, the group deliberates about where to eat dinner, which Bateman has brought "Mr. Zagat" to resolve, an act that he repeats throughout the novel (in which *Zagat* is mentioned 13 times). Commenting on the wholesale constitution of Bateman's aesthetic taste by the mediasphere in which he is immersed, Storey writes, "The evidence of the novel alerts us to Bateman's unreliability, but the language that describes his atrocious acts sets off alarm bells on a deeper level; life for Bateman, it seems, is one long film. This blurring between a coherent idea of Bateman's interiority and the language in which his identity is immersed extends into every part of the novel" (Storey 61). For example, writes Storey, in addition to his inability to decide

which restaurant to visit without consulting the *Zagat* guide, "he cannot offer an opinion on something without first having read a review of it (he tries to remember a line from *New York Magazine* to describe a painting by David Onica [99]). The constant listing of brands, makes, and models is unmistakably evocative of catalogue-speak or a consumer guide" (Storey 61). To add nuance to Storey's account of Bateman's "one long film" and bring it into resonance with Ferguson's analysis, it is clearly a film that remediates the stuff of trusted print media (*Zagat*, *New York Magazine*, *GQ*, *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, store catalogs, consumer guides, etc . . .), whose opinions, recommendations, and instructions he regurgitates, as well as the content and formal features of television shows, commercials, music videos, and cinema. In so doing, he not only subjectifies his media ("Mr. Zagat") but also objectifies, that is to say *re-mediates*, himself through it; he *is* "*total GQ*" (*American Psycho* 90). Bateman is so thoroughly constituted by media and name brands to whose trappings he accords superior status over those around him that "the constant search for excessive distinctiveness . . . issues in its opposite, the inability of any individual to perform an action that can be connected with his name by other people" (Ferguson 33. Everyone in the novel seems to be interchangeable with everyone else[46]: Bateman confuses most every man in his circle with everyone else and is, in turn, so-confused by his peers; by the same token, the women are reduced to interchangeable "hardbodies" whom their boyfriends' interchangeable friends take turn sleeping with behind the women's official boyfriends' backs. Bateman is sleeping with Luis Carruthers' girlfriend while Price is likely conducting an affair with Bateman's.

Storey points out that this economy of interchangeability closely resembles a Girardian dynamic of "mimetic rivalry," a dynamic that compellingly explains Bateman's murder of Owen, who, amongst all of the doppelgangers, represents the most perfect manifestation of the Bateman

personality complex. Owen has captured the prized Fisher account, has a better apartment than Patrick, and has no difficulty getting into Dorsia (the Holy Grail of elite restaurants in Bateman's universe). As a consequence, "[Owen] is the sun around which Bateman and his interchangeable companions circle in emulation and envy" (Murphet 44). In spite of the fact that the analyses of Storey and Murphet do not probe the implications of these Girardian optics very far,[47] such an understanding provides a framework for understanding yet another layer of mediation in Patrick's life. In the study that Storey cites, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, René Girard hypothesizes two interoriented modalities of mimetic mediation, internal and external: internal mediation operates roughly at the level of the psychoanalytic "ideal ego," that is to say, especially in the history of Western literature, it often plays out as a rivalry between relative mirror images, "mimetic rivals," over a shared object of desire; in the case of *American Psycho*, "internal mediation" would describe Patrick's relationship with his veritable mirror images – Price, Owen, Van Patten, and Carruthers; in particular, Patrick has an intense mimetic attachment first to Price and then Owen as arbiters, or at least nodes, of taste and distinction; but he splits them into good and bad manifestations. Price is "the most interesting person [Patrick] know[s]" (*American Psycho* 21), and he even seems to be unoffended by the fact that Price may be conducting an affair with Evelyn, which, according to the Girardian formulation of mimetic rivalry, should be anathema to Bateman and amplify his interest in her (which it does not). This may well be because Bateman's mirror images are simply that and do not exist outside of his imagination. His ultimate mimetic rival, in strictly Girardian terms, is Paul Owen, the most perfect immediate manifestation of Bateman's occupational form of life, and Patrick murders him "on this account."

External mediation operates at something like the level of the psychoanalytic "ego ideal," the overarching respected, benevolent parental figure that constitutes the high water mark of distinction. In Patrick's case, this is the kind of upper pantheon occupied by Donald Trump and, looming above him, Ronald Reagan. Bateman's preoccupation with Trump (whose name is repeated 30 times throughout the novel) manifests itself as a constant alertness for any sign of Donald, Ivana, or even their car; he speculates that "hardbodies" would deem "close personal friend[ship]" with Trump to be a pre-eminently attractive quality in a man (presumably as a sign of social mobility by virtue of proximity to the Trump mimetic lightning rod); he tries and fails to get himself invited to the Trump Christmas party (*American Psycho* 177); and he even introduces himself to a limo driver, however sarcastically, as Donald Trump. This mimetic fixation on Trump explains the confusion that sets in when Patrick is told that the restaurant whose pizza he fastidiously disapproves of is actually Donald Trump's favourite. Confronted with a Xerox copy of an article (tellingly, referred to merely by the corporation's name – "a Xerox") in which Trump praises the pizza that Bateman has declared substandard (in one of the novel's many bizarre moments of reification, going so far as to yell at, consider murdering, and then apologize to McDermott for insulting the pizza that he likes), he does an about-face on his assessment and praises it in lock-step with his external mimetic medium. Trump, then, figures as an arbiter of "taste" (conducted through a Xerox copy of a newspaper or magazine article) that, like *Zagat*, "trumps" his own "immediate" sense perception: "Well, . . . I think I have to *re*taste the pizza," Bateman concedes, ". . . if the pizza is okay with Donny, . . . it's okay with me" (*American Psycho* 110).

In accordance with the feminist critiques of pornography against which Ferguson defends *American Psycho*, women serve as the reified "objects" of desire for whose affections

chauvinistic men of privilege in Bateman's circle compete. But, when closely analyzed, far from serving as a locus of titillation, this mimetic pandemonium unfolds in a fashion that sheds negative light on 1980's American yuppie culture. The "subjective violence" with which readers of *American Psycho* are periodically bombarded is a part of a sophisticated narrative strategy for underscoring the imbrication of different modalities of violence percolating through the lives of characters who "[are] so commodified and objectified that [they] can no longer retain a shape for [their] environments and a profile for [their] persons" (Ferguson 7). In addition to the usual concatenation of brands that mark every interaction in *American Psycho* (between people, between people and objects, and between people and their milieu), the relationship between men and women is uniquely mediated and deserving of analysis. As Murphet observes about Bateman's exchanges with his girlfriend Evelyn and his various sexual conquests, interactions between the genders betoken the absence of a natural "sexual rapport"[48] between them. At a restaurant with Evelyn, Bateman is immediately thrust into a state of torpor by what he perceives as her inane yammering (even though, strictly speaking, it would seem to emanate out of the exact same discursive nexus and manifest the same formal features as his own): "Evelyn is talking but I'm not listening. Her dialogue overlaps her own dialogue. Her mouth is moving but I'm not hearing anything and I can't listen" (*American Psycho* 123). At points, tuning almost altogether out of the conversation, he reports only the fragmentary shrapnel of her discourse: "Tandoori chicken and foie gras, and lots of jazz, and he adored the Savoy, but shad roe, the colors were gorgeous, aloe, shell, citrus, Morgan Stanley . . ." (*American Psycho* 122); and, again: "Groton, Lawrenceville, Milton, Exeter, Kent, Saint Paul's, Hotchkiss, Andover, Milton, Choate . . . oops, already said Milton . . . " (*American Psycho* 123).[49]

Murphet focuses on Patrick's reduction of Evelyn's language through "the filter of [his consciousness into] mere listmaking . . . . The intervening verbs and presiding intentionality are lost. Bateman hears only an endless succession of proper names behind which no organizing consciousness could exist" (Murphet 30). This is a world in which "[m]en and women do not so much talk to each other . . . as pile up meaningless, irreconcilable lists on dishes garnished with indifference" (Murphet 30). At the end of the day, however, because the narrative is mediated entirely through Bateman's first-person account, it is difficult to ascertain whether it is merely Patrick who suffers from the absence of an "organizing consciousness" and thereby reconstitutes the world around him as such or characters like Evelyn also lack any kind of autonomous interiority and are as "hapless" (Murphet 30) as he makes them out to be. Still, the biggest discrepancy in his account of his conversations with his male interlocutors and his female ones is the level of interest Bateman is capable of devoting to hollowed-out litanies of brand names, consumer goods, and luminous individuals (the only time that Bateman perks up during the aforementioned conversation with Evelyn is when she mistakenly thinks she spots Ivana Trump). Ultimately, this is because the "hardbody" women around Bateman are for him little more than instruments, the acquisition of which garners for him little more than the fleeting gratifications of conquest and orgasm.

But even orgasm, the zenith of vacuous hedonism, is far from immediate. Only after scrutinizing the condom and spermicidal lubricant at great length to ensure that they are up to snuff, can they proceed with the altogether unexceptional act of coitus. "Consumer goods," writes Murphet, "intervene between human agents to the point that they displace anything resembling feeling; pleasure is knowing you're using the right lubricant. The obvious comedy is laced with the most despairing social vision" (Murphet 39). Even Patrick and Courtenay's most

“intimate” sexual encounters are dictated by the world of advertisements, consumer guides, and product packages, a densely-woven infosphere that dictates even the terms through which sexual “connection” and orgasm can take place (though neither actually seems to transpire much for anyone in the novel). To pick up Murphet's Lacanian reading and run with it, even in the holy shrine of sexual intimacy, the couple is never alone; the mediatic *Big Other* both constitutes and impinges on the scene as any pretense of connection gives way to fraught, frazzled connectivity.

Storey articulates yet another fold of mediation in Patrick's interactions with women, especially in his trysts with prostitutes and “hardbodies” whom he meets at nightclubs. Patrick’s “. . . real-life sexual acts become intertwined with the pornography he freely admits to watching, to the extent that in his own narrative the line between the two is obliterated” (Storey 61). For example, he describes a scene from a favourite pornographic film, *Inside Lydia’s Ass*, and “describes a scene from it in exactly the same uninflected, cool prose in which he later describes the ‘real’ sex. As a result, the sex, like the violence, becomes less realistic; for the most part, it reads like a certain type of male fantasy, and at one point Bateman even describes a threesome as a ‘hard-core montage’” (Storey 61).

The derivative script and choreography of Bateman's own experiential “film,” peopled in no small part by sex trade workers who are reduced to the status of mere performers, ones who are there only because of the remuneration, are overdetermined by the “heavily stereotyped language of mass-marketed porn” (Murphet 38) to the point that there is rarely much pleasure to be had for anyone involved, a stultified affective state which Murphet, tacitly invoking Jameson (and echoing *White Noise*’s Murray Siskind), characterizes as “the waning of sexual feeling under the regime of commodities in which he functions” (Murphet 38). To dwell with Murphet's Lacanian-Jamesonian reading, it should come as no surprise that mass media constitute the

fantasies that frame the scene; from a Lacanian vantage point, these are the basic coordinates of all human desire in the mediasphere. But Bateman has such privileged access to the "objects" of his desire that the minimal distance which usually constitutes desire is obliterated and Bateman is subjected to a libidinal economy of diminishing returns within his homogenizing occupational cocoon. No "hardbody" conquest, no rarefied dish, no *mise-en-scene* is enough to feed his demand for enjoyment. After mistreating Evelyn and then staging his perfidious pornographic scene with Christie and Evelyn, Patrick claims "[s]ome kind of existential chasm opens up before [him] while . . . browsing in Bloomingdales and causes [him] to first locate a phone and check [his] messages then, near tears, after taking three Halcion" (*American Psycho* 180). The Halcion, however, has limited impact on him, or so he claims; because his body "has mutated and adapted to the drug it no longer causes sleep—it just seems to ward off total madness" (*American Psycho* 180). The passage continues,

> I head toward the Clinique counter where with my platinum American Express card I buy six tubes of shaving cream while flirting nervously with the girls who work there and I decide this emptiness has, at least in part, some connection with the way I treated Evelyn at Barcadia the other night, though there is always the possibility it could just as easily have something to do with the tracking device on my VCR, and while I make a mental note to put in an appearance at Evelyn's Christmas party . . . I also remind myself to look through my VCR handbook and deal with the tracking device problem. (*American Psycho* 180)

This return to the VCR, like his frequent returns to the video store, evinces the *re-mediality* of Bateman's predicament. The closest thing to a remedy that he can find for this psychotropic "chasm" is to endeavor to repair this medial externalization of his "self," his VCR, which also happens to be the primary vehicle of his occupational *psychosis*, the increasingly abyssal *demontage* of his life.

3.6 Uncommon Ground

While Bateman murders Owen because they have too much in common, they are too consubstantial, he also perpetrates violence against those with whom he perceives he has nothing in common. This vicious disidentificatory culling targets homeless people, racialized individuals, and women (especially prostitutes). Patrick commits the novel's first obtrusive act of subjective violence against Al, a homeless black man who is panhandling on the street. After a brief exchange, Bateman launches into an inquisition that turns on the discrepancies between the homeless man's occupational life and his own. After introducing himself and offering, disingenuously, to give him some money, Bateman engages him in a conversation about his employment situation:

> "Why don't you get a job?" I ask, the bill still held in my hand but not within the bum's reach. "If you're so hungry, why don't you get a job?"
>
> He breathes in, shivering, and between sobs admits, "I lost my job . . ."
>
> "Why? . . . . Were you drinking? Is that why you lost it? Insider trading? just joking. No, really—were you drinking on the job?"

He hugs himself, between sobs, chokes, “I was fired. I was laid off.”

But Bateman is dissatisfied by the poor man's inability to pluck himself up by the bootstraps and presses the issues:

> “Why don’t you get another one? . . . . Why don’t you get another job?”
>
> “I’m not . . .” He coughs, holding himself, shaking miserably, violently, unable to finish the sentence.
>
> “You’re not what?” I ask softly. “Qualified for anything else?”
>
> “I'm hungry,” he whispers.
>
> “I know that, I know that,” I say. ‘Jeez, you’re like a broken record. I’m trying to help you . . .” My impatience rises . . . .
>
> “Listen. Do you think it’s fair to take money from people who do have jobs? Who do work?”
>
> His face crumples and he gasps, his voice raspy, “What am I gonna do?” (*American Psycho* 130)

After some more back-and-forth, Bateman implores the man, “Get a goddamn job, Al . . . You’ve got a negative attitude. That’s what’s stopping you. You’ve got to get your act together. I’ll help you” (*American Psycho* 130). Given everything that has preceded the exchange, Bateman's indignation is hyperbolically hypocritical. His entire occupational lifestyle is organized around recreation and the injunction to *jouissance*, and he is so pre-occupied with ostentatious consumption that this densely-mediated sphere of activity constitutes his “job.” Moreover, given

that his affluent father owns the firm, as well as a sizable chunk of Manhattan, his hypocrisy in importuning Al to empower himself is hyperbolic, to say the least.

As Al thanks Patrick for his offer of assistance, Bateman chastizes him for lack of hygiene:

> "Do you know how bad you smell?" I whisper this soothingly, stroking his face. "The stench, my god . . . "
>
> "I can't. . . . " He chokes, then swallows. "I can't find a shelter."
>
> "You reek," I tell him. "You reek of . . . shit." I'm still petting the dog, its eyes wide and wet and grateful. "Do you know that? Goddamnit, Al—look at me and stop crying like some kind of faggot," I shout. My rage builds, . . . then I sigh: "Al . . . I'm sorry. It's just that . . . I don't know. I don't have anything in common with you . . . . "Do you know what a fucking loser you are?" (*American Psycho* 131)

Patrick then repeatedly stabs Al in the eye, stomach, and hands, delighting in his utter violation, we could even call it an "ocular rape," of Al. The "othering" that Bateman imposes on Al is deeply bound up with class, race, gender roles, hygiene and the occupational sphere. Al, his dog, and the women Patrick hurts and kills are, in Girardian-Burkean terms, the "mimetic scapegoats" of his homosocial patriarchal occupational universe, a conjuncture of "community" and "immunity" figured by his obtrusive disgust at the man with whom he does not "have anything in common." Storey astutely frames this scapegoating mechanism in immunitary terms: "In Bateman's order, that of normative masculinity, the people he hates are the 'dirt' that threaten the 'purity' of his own (albeit imagined) existence. His project becomes an extreme example of

pomophobia, a reaction not built on irrationality, but something stemming from a deeply conservative mindset" (Storey 64).

A number of critics point usefully to Patrick's classist, racist, and sexist outbursts as manifestations of his lack of agency within his medial milieu. Thomas B. Byers, whose concept of "pomophobia" Storey draws on in this passage, speculates that "[p]ostmodernity's relentless dismantling of established orders and its deconstruction of the old hegemonic discourses strikes fear into the normative masculinity that relies so heavily on them" (qtd. in Storey 57-8). For Murphet, such "explosion[s] of pure class/ethnic hatred" (Murphet 37), including calling a Jewish waitress a "retarded cocksucking kike" (*American Psycho* 152) and threatening to murder his "jibbering" Chinese laundress (*American Psycho*), are manifestations of Bateman's effort at "redirection of all [the] panic and nausea" (Murphet 37) induced by his relative impotence, "his ever-escalating fury and desperation at his actual uselessness" (Murphet 32). Far from being an omnipotent "master of the universe," Bateman has control of surprisingly little in his mediatized occupational universe. Citing Bateman's inability to get a table at Dorsia, handle the Fisher account, rent a new video, hang the Onica painting right-side up, recognize almost anyone correctly, and kill Carruthers, Murphet observes that Bateman, in spite of his confident tone, is an utterly ineffectual character who is unable to do much more than "with decreasing success, … [uphold] his physical and public appearance through meticulous discipline, cliché, and props. It is in this regard that his language of pedantry comes to mean so much as pure compensation for the lack of any actual achievement" (32). "Bateman," Murphet continues, "very precisely does nothing; but his control over certain kinds of information and 'taste' assumes the importance for him of a kind of action. His psychosis as such has less to do with his violence than it does with the 'slippage' of his meticulously maintained 'mask of sanity'" (33).

Murphet's insightful contention that Bateman, in effect, scapegoats "others" outside his chauvinistic sphere in order to compensate for his ineffectuality and Storey's characterization of his violent class-race-gender hygiene find corroboration in his interaction with Bethany, his estranged ex-girlfriend. When they reconnect, Patrick has her read a hateful racist poem that he claims to have written for her:

> "The poor nigger on the wall. Look at him." She pauses and squints again at the paper, then hesitantly resumes. "Look at the poor nigger. Look at the poor nigger . . . on . . . the . . . wall.'" She stops again, faltering, . . . confused, then back at the paper . . . . "Fuck him . . . Fuck the nigger on the wall . . . " She falters again, then reads the last sentence, sighing. "Black man . . . is . . . de . . . debil?" (*American Psycho* 233)

This almost incoherent, highly-offensive poem,[50] which sets up a link between his attraction to Bethany, an ideal denizen of his white occupational universe, and Al, one of its excrementalized remainders, also gestures towards the inevitable violence that he will perpetrate on her on account of her having surpassed him in her accumulation of cultural and social capital. Bethany is guilty, according to Patrick's occupational worldview, of what Murphet characterizes as ". . . two unforgivable acts of 'violence' against [his] monumental egotism" (Murphet 41): she discloses that she is dating the chef and co-owner of Dorsia (Patrick's holy grail); and she points out that Patrick has hung his David Onica painting upside. "She has thus one-upped him socially as well as culturally, and Bateman's language is nowhere more pointedly in crisis" (Murphet 41).

As Murphet also notes, this expression of psychotic calamity is explicitly mediatic: “Yes, my brain does explode and my stomach bursts open inwardly – a spastic, acidic, gastric reaction; stars and planets. Whole galaxies of little white chef hats, race over the film of my vision” (*American Psycho* 239; qtd. in Murphet 41). And, when Patrick decides to kill Bethany, the inner film reel once again unspools: “As if in slow motion, like in a movie, she turns around” (*American Psycho* 245; qtd. in Murphet 41).

The unreal, video-game-like cinematography of Patrick's experience of exposure gestures in the direction of psychotic hallucination. He responds by murdering Bethany in a scene whose media sources can be found in Bateman's own video archives. Patrick attacks Bethany with a nail gun, an assault which is taken right out of one of his favourite movies, *The Toolbox Murders;* importantly, this takes place in a scene to which Brian DePalma makes a homage in Patrick's favourite film, *Body Double*, which he claims to have rented 37 times. The unreliability of Patrick's account is further compounded by his claim that he maces Bethany repeatedly, as, without protective eyewear and respiratory gear, he would not be able to calmly film himself torturing her on his Sony Handycam in a room full of mace. The *Body Double* motif makes a reappearance when Bateman murders Tiffany with a power drill, recapitulating his favourite moment in the film, “where the woman . . . gets drilled by the . . . power driller in the movie . . . the best . . . . And the blood starts pouring out of the ceiling” (*American Psycho* 113), a scene to which he routinely masturbates, which is to say, he treats it as pornography. This scene in *Body Double* involves a man in an Indian mask wielding a power drill like a phallus, which he then employs to kill his wife. The mask and power tool, in turn, invoke *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, a film which Bateman and his friends discuss early on in the text after Patrick brings up serial killer Ed Gein:

> "But you always bring them up," McDermott complains. "And always in this casual, educational sort of way. I mean, I don't want to know anything about Son of Sam or the fucking Hillside Strangler or Ted Bundy or Featherhead, for god sake."
>
> "Featherhead?" Van Patten asks. "Who's Featherhead? He sounds exceptionally dangerous."
>
> "He means Leatherface," I say, teeth tightly clenched. "Leatherface. He was part of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.*" (153)

Despite the fact that Bateman is the only member of his group to distinguish the real, historical serial killer, Gein, from the fictional one in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which is, in fact, loosely inspired by Gein's exploits, he sets up a chain of equivalency just like the one afforded by his limousine window in the opening scene. Film critic Chris Dumas thus claims that *Body Double* is just such a *mise-en-abyme* of referentiality, one that provides vital clues as to how to read *American Psycho*: "*Body Double* is Hitchcock; it is Godard reading Hitchcock; it is De Palma reading Godard reading Hitchcock; it is De Palma reading *Ms. Magazine* reading De Palma reading Godard reading Hitchcock; like *American Psycho*, it is recursive at every level; there is no solid surface to step down to" (Dumas 209). The murders Bateman commits—or imagines he commits—involve a recursive "montage" of inter-referential film scenes and accounts of the historical violence that (however loosely) inspired them. Thus, the Indian mask worn by the *Body Double* murderer with whom Patrick identifies figures as a stand-in for Patrick's precarious "mask of sanity," one that can never manifest the racist absolute ideal of

normative whiteness that it aspires to. It is as though Bateman's psychotic "citationality" *re-mediates* his normative whiteness, turning "the volume up" on all channels until they flip over into their opposites—hypermasculinity into *stereo-typical* effeminacy, omnipotence into impotence, and sterile whiteness into its "filthy" racialized "others." [51]

In "The Generic *American Psycho*," David Eldridge focuses on the obtrusive constructedness of Bateman, whom he views as little more than a recycling plant for pop-cultural debris, especially that of "debased genres." In "Absence Pleasures: Whiteness, Death, and Music in *American Psycho*," Julia Jarcho draws on Eldridge's groundwork to make the compelling case that Ellis' novel, far from being a pornographic celebration of violence, foregrounds the manifold interrelations between violence, citationality, and the cultural construction of race. Bateman's attempts to inhabit "prefabricated cultural posture[s]," asserts Jarcho, constitute "a failure of citation" (Jarcho). This is especially the case in Patrick's attempts to attain an ideal state of whiteness, his cosmetically augmented, artificially tanned "mask of sanity," calibrated to the manifold dictates of the Culture Industry. But his whiteness is, Jarcho speculates, also conducted through such media as his "bone" coloured business card. Jarcho does not pursue this insight very far, but this mediation of his whiteness —a racial subject-position that he equates with health, potency, and immunity—points to a *re-medial* logic not unlike the one found in *White Noise*, a mediatization of whiteness that transforms the presumed panacea into a toxin. In the famous scene in which the businessmen (who never seem to do any actual business) compare businesss cards, each one brandishes a meticulously curated slightly differently-hued white card. Patrick is hurt that Price, the Girardian "internal medium" and arbiter of worth, likes Van Patten's "Eggshell with Ramalian type" (*American Psycho* 44) card more than his own; and Montgomery's card's superior "subtle off-white coloring, its tasteful thickness" depresses

Bateman. According to Jillian Jarcho, the fact that Bateman's card is described as “bone” white is replete with underappreciated significance, which pertains directly to both his own “whiteness” and death. Patrick’s simulacral predicament and environment, writes Jarcho, is marked by “ . . . the vertiginous spinout of yuppie insincerity and excess themselves ironized and hyperbolized, of superficiality reproduced in gleaming surfaces, one cannot but feel the euphoria of an utter loss of ultimate referent, a look-ma-no-hands detachment from any origin” (Jarcho). She continues, suggestively, “This is what it must feel like to be Patrick Bateman; this is what it must feel like to be white. The color of such whiteness is the color of Patrick’s business card, the printed-up repository of his totally graphematic (non-)identity. It is the color of death, naming itself with a wink: ‘bone’” (Jarcho).

Unfortunately, Jarcho does not fully unpack this manifold tropology beyond the valuable insight that bone is also “the color of death” (Jarcho). Indeed, the word “bone” occurs twenty times throughout the novel, often to describe the actual bones of his victims. It even occurs once in conjunction with his personal whitening regime, when he “find[s] part of a bone” (*American Psycho* 386) in a coconut Dove Bar (yet another instrument of white hygiene). “Bone” also refers to Bateman's imagined omnipotence, his pursuit of a permanent “boner” like the violent prosthetic one he admires in *Body Double*; but the medium of the card serves as a failed vehicle for his whiteness amongst the more aesthetically pleasing white cards brandished by his friends, and even perhaps stands as a *momento mori*, betokening the impossibility of all these pursuits in the cacophonously heteronomous mediasphere that he inhabits. The cumulative picture is one in which Bateman is caught up in the psychotic Imaginary of a worldview of white authenticity in a narrative universe in which whiteness is perhaps even more of an externalized media construct

than in *White Noise* and "the good life" is a ceaselessly *re-mediated* flickering mirage subtended by unthinkable systemic violence.

These optics also shed light on Bateman's citational practice when he is in a jam. Jarcho observes that "[t]he first time the detective shows up, Patrick gets out of the interview early by claiming to have a lunch date 'with Cliff Huxtable,' the character Bill Cosby plays on *The Cosby Show*" (Jarcho). Likewise, when Detective Kimball (whose name would seem to refer to Reverend Kimball in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, which is advertised on New York street posters alongside posters for *Les Mis* in the novel) about his interaction with Owen, he claims to have attended a fictional musical "laugh riot" called *O, Africa Brave Africa*. Though, once again, Jarcho does not pursue the implications of Bateman's economy of citationality very far, what we can refer to as his "whitewashes" of blackness, including his infatuation with Whitney Houston, are products of a 1980's corporate mediasphere that systematically resolves the strife out of the racialized, classed, gendered experience of the world in order to make it palatable to well-heeled white, predominantly male media consumers.

There is, agrees, Carl F. Miller in "Where the Beat Sounds the Same: *American Psycho* and the Cultural Capital of Pop Music," ". . . a significant racial dynamic to Bateman's musical assessment" (Miller 62). Bateman is "tolerant" of the 1960 Motown girl group the Shirelles and Bobby McFerrin, ". . . whose middlebrow hit 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' he appreciates in much the same way that he does Whitney Houston's catalog" (62); however, observes, Miller, he dislikes any artists that seem to undermine the racial/ethnic order: "He disdains all classical jazz save for Bix Beiderbecke; he contends that Genesis produces 'a groove funkier and blacker than anything Prince or Michael Jackson—*or any other black artist in recent years*—has come up

with' … [and goes on] a racial diatribe in which he ignorantly conflates rap with reggae" (Miller 62; my italics).

Murphet pursues a similar race-focused line of inquiry, explicating Bateman's enthusiasm for post-Gabriel Genesis in Peter Gabriel's participation in anti-Apartheid activity (of a non "laugh riot" variety) and the band's subsequent musical oeuvre that ". . . abolishes intellectual content in the name of 'poppy and lighthearted' inanity" (Murphet 34). Indeed, one of Bateman's favourite Genesis songs, "Illegal Alien," is the apotheosis of this poppy banalization of the implications of white American immunitary xenophobia. Murphet also probes the cracks and fissures of the racial issue to expose Bateman's absolute "collapse of critical integrity" (Murphet 34).

Thus, avers Murphet, Patrick's love of Huey Lewis and Whitney Houston emerges out of a psyche that has ". . . surrendered every critical impulse and gone over to the conformities of the entertainment industry" (Murphet 34). By the same token, Huey Lewis' "Hip to be Square" is laudable as "a rollicking ode to conformity" (*American Psycho* 357), and Whitney Houston's "The Greatest Love of All" carries, for Bateman, the universal message that "since it's impossible in the world we live in to empathize with others, we can always empathize with ourselves"[52] (*American Psycho* 254); this, from a woman whom he characterizes as "… the most exciting and original *black* jazz voice of her generation" (*American Psycho*; my italics) precisely because she is a crystalline exemplar of the "whitewashing" that characterizes his medial ecology. Bateman's is a world in which the dissident promise held out by both the likes of Elvis Costello and American punk rock culture in early Ellis novels like *Less than Zero* has been ". . . smothered by corporate mediocrity" (Murphet 34). Even the supposedly avant-garde artists, Stash and Vanden, are just as indentured to MTV and the surfeit of product-choice as Bateman is.

3.7 Mimetic Contagion and Auto(mated)immunity

American Psycho's treatment of the occupation, immunity, gender, race, and class figure prominently in the recurrent troping of HIV throughout the novel. From the beginning, Bateman and his associates figure their wealthy, white, heterosexual community as immune to HIV:

> "It's really funny that girls think guys are concerned with that, with diseases and stuff," Van Patten says, shaking his head.
>
> "I'm not gonna wear a fucking condom," McDermott announces.
>
> "I have read this article I've Xeroxed," Van Patten says, "and it says our chances of catching that are like zero zero zero zero point half a decimal percentage or something, and this no matter what kind of scumbag, slutbucket, horndog chick we end up boffing."
>
> "Guys just cannot get it."
>
> "Well, not white guys." (*American Psycho* 34)

According to the perverse immunitary logic of Bateman's community, promiscuous women are figured as disease vectors but the promiscuous white men in their cohort wield some kind of magical immunity, an occupational prophylaxis. It is noteworthy that this markedly erroneous statistical information about the likelihood of contracting HIV is mediated through hearsay about a photocopy (once again, referred to merely by the corporation's name – "a Xerox") of an article, a simulacral copy of a copy, subordinated to the mimetic economy of the Culture Industry, that is deracinated from any kind of immediate contact with the visceral Real of the auto-immunitary

disease. As such, even if such an article does not exist and Van Patten is merely invoking the *ethos* of the mediastream to promulgate the lie of their invulnerability, the mediasphere itself becomes a disease vector as media actually vehiculate the circulation of the disease by affording the dissemination of misinformation.

Misinformation abounds in the group's notions about the AIDS virus. During the cab ride at the beginning of the novel, Price complains about how filthy New York is:

> He takes off the expensive-looking Walkman from around his neck, still complaining. "I hate to complain—I really do—about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city really is and you know and I know that it is a sty . . . . [He] pulls out today's newspaper. "In one issue . . . strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, . . . Nazis . . . baseball players with AIDS, . . . the homeless, . . . faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, . . . baby-sellers, . . . AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, . . ." His voice stops, he takes in a breath and then quietly says, his eyes fixed on a beggar at the corner of Second and Fifth, "That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today. I've kept count." (*American Psycho* 4)

Price then switches gears from his hateful tabloid litany to a tabloid-derived-sounding theory about why it is necessary to buffer oneself against the putatively repellant masses: "Diseases!" he exclaims, his face tense with pain. "There's this theory out now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone

> who is infected then you can also catch anything, whether it's a virus per se or not—Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, hemophilia, leukemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes—you can get dyslexia from pussy —" (*American Psycho* 4)

Price, here, unwittingly articulates the full autoimmunitary logic of his mediatic-occupational sphere, exemplified by the taxi ride that insulates him from the "filth" that so disgusts him. Price's equanimity is threatened by the defiled city, which he figures as a manifold environmental disease vector that he must nevertheless make his way through. The radio contributes to this insulating effect by distracting him from his immediate environment and, yet, once again, as a conduit of the mediasphere, radio, which—like the newspaper, television, and gossip—transmits the variety of tabloid theory about the spread of disease that Price propounds, and threatens to serve as a disease vector in its dissemination of false information about modes, vehicles, and sources of contagion as well as preventative measures. This material-semiotic dynamic is rife with significance: the decline in the symbolic efficiency of communication (a symptom, for Žižek, of the decline of paternal authority inherent to the emergence of digital biopolitics) corresponds to a spike in viral communicability; at the same time, viscera constitute the very indivisible remainders of medial-socio-symbolic operations; that is to say, organs and fluids, forcibly removed from their originary bodies, are compelled to signify; thus, as Ferguson observes, the sushi at the Christmas party is converted into letters that concatenate in accordance with the schizoid logic of Bateman's world. This also sheds light on Bateman's impetus to feed a cat to an ATM and fax the blood of one of his victims (and it should come as no surprise that he

does not mention a recipient). According to the recursive logic of the occupational mediasphere that he inhabits, the violent medium (that is to say, the whole economic assemblage that constitutes Bateman's medial milieu) ceaselessly processes everything, even "bare life," through its Satanic mills. The medium is the massacre but it would be insufficient to merely refer to Bateman's disaster zone as a "postmodern" bloodbath. Patrick's schizoid misrecognition of signifiers and life betokens not just a fragmentary multiplicity of significations but, perhaps more importantly, the metaleptic deadlock that psychotically alienates life within an opaque, thanatopolitically charged mediasphere. This misprision within the prism house of Patrick's mediasphere is also an integral point of resonance with *White Noise*, wherein one of the side-effects of the drug Dylar is the inability to discriminate between words and things.

Bateman and his colleagues imagine themselves insulated from the disease by virtue of their privileged station in life. And yet, this rich, white homosocial occupational universe is perforated and exposed in countless ways that they would seem to disavow. Not only are these men brazenly engaged in sexual promiscuity both inside (including with each other's partners) and outside (with random strangers and prostitutes) their community, but there are also suggestions that AIDS is already circulating through their ranks. On the fringes of their group, for example, Evelyn's friend, the artist Stash, has apparently tested positive for the AIDS virus and, nonetheless, plans to have sex with, and presumably spread the disease to, his girlfriend Vanden; upon hearing of this plan, Bateman, who dislikes both of these denizens of "the bowels of the city," responds phlegmatically, "Good" (*American Psycho* 22).

Frances Ferguson analyzes the significance of AIDS and dyslexia in this narrative universe: "AIDS doesn't mean either silence or death to them but a reading disorder. Yet to say that a sexually transmitted disease would impair Bateman's reading skills is to say that it would

hit him where he lives, where names are more important than the actual existence of the persons to whom they refer" (Ferguson 148). Bateman, after all, "can become apoplectic at people's ability to make mistakes in recognizing Ivana Trump and Brooke Astor" (148) even while displaying the most callous indifference towards the plights of those who are suffering all around him (and often directly or indirectly because of him). "Celebrities, like the clothes that so regularly get recognized and detailed as if their wearers were only so many models, represent the only stability there is to be had in the novel" (148). Indeed, Bateman's own efforts to communicate with those around him are constantly distorted by the noise in the diegetic machine and misunderstood: "[he] can leave a message on an answering machine that says that he has killed scores of people, and the confession will be heard as a joke – one among the numerous dyslexic rather than Freudian puns that associate 'mergers and acquisitions' with 'mergers and aqua-sessions' and 'murders and executions' (202, 206) and confuse 'decapitated' with 'decaffeinated' (372) . . . " (Ferguson 148-9).

According to Ferguson's erudite reading of Bateman's puns, whether they are better understood as jokes or parapraxes, they are symptomatic of a kind of cultural dyslexia that emerges out of his illegible position in a medial milieu which is so shot-through with noise that no utterance is treated as properly self-identical. In such a world, which Ferguson compares to a Luhmanian self-enclosed system (that is to say, one that is constantly reiterating the system-environment distinction), Bateman's pedantic form of cultural competence is a learning impediment and the media really is the message: ". . . persons like Bateman start developing different media for themselves so as to become better consumers. They produce themselves in multiple media - the earnest record reviewer, the serial murderer, the expert on the finest point of the appropriateness of clothes" (Ferguson 149). As a consequence, they become "improved

consumers [who] can imagine needing multiple copies of the same magazines and all the different formats of an album for their various aspects" (Ferguson 149).[53] From the vantage point of advanced capitalism, there is no such thing as redundant or counterproductive consumption.

Even though much of Bateman's media is analog, Ferguson's reading reverberates as a dystopian riff on media theorist Geoffrey Winthrop-Young's Kittlerian-Foucauldian account of "man" being wiped away like a face in the sand at the edge of the sea on account of ". . . the compression of that very sand into silicon, . . . giv[ing] rise to a post-human(ist) techno-episteme" ("Silicon Sociology" 402). Through this Kittlerian lens, communication is never viewed "as a meeting and sharing of minds" (399). To the contrary, ". . . communication does not communicate because media do not mediate. Given the extent to which media standards rule the selection and encoding of the message (and sometimes even trigger the communicative act itself), whatever 'message' is produced turns out to be a surface effect of the media logic itself" (399). This kind of reading of Bateman's asignifying mediality holds a great deal of water. Nevertheless, it is far from the whole story. Ferguson's contention that the puns and parapraxes that litter the text should not be read psychoanalytically is flawed, especially with regard to Bateman's wordplay on his occupation, which breaks down along extraordinarily Žižekian lines. The irony of having the model symbolically resolve the "violence" out of Bateman's claim that he is in "murders and executions" is multidimensional. Not only is Bateman a murderer (if only in his own mind), but these acts of subjective violence are, as Murphet observes, phenomenal manifestations of the kind of invisible occupational violence that he and his "master of the universe" colleagues perpetrate as both corporate raiders at work and callous gentrifiers at home. The model's symbolic filtration of the violence out of his occupation evinces the very medial operation of the occupational gated community that they inhabit.

At one point Evelyn, who has been conducting an affair with Price, speculates about his disappearance to a hospital in Arizona, asking Patrick, "You don't think it's . . . AIDS?" (*American Psycho* 120). Patrick clumsily reassures her that he's merely suffering from some kind of "general . . . brain . . . injuries," though the source and verity of this information is unclear. Oddly, the only other mention of Arizona in the novel occurs when Carruthers (who is just as ethereal and unreliable a mimetic double as Price) interprets Bateman's hostility as flirtation and claims to have adored Patrick ever since a Christmas party at "Arizona 206" (*American Psycho* 159). Either way, given that Price is perhaps the most significant Bateman *Doppelganger* in his microcosm, the reference to brain damage gestures in the direction of Bateman's own cognitive impairment.

At the end of the novel, while Patrick is caught up in earnest deliberation about Madonna song lyrics and tabloid noise, Price suddenly returns to Bateman's office from wherever precisely he has been with a "smudge" on his head. This smudge gestures towards the remedial logic of the novel. The smudge may be a lesion from the auto-immunitary disease (to which their occupational sphere turns out to have been no buffer at all) and/or it may reflect his medial status as a smudged frame in the movie of Patrick's life. Bateman himself renders Price's presence questionable:

> And, for the sake of form, Tim Price resurfaces, or at least I'm pretty sure

> he does. While I'm at my desk simultaneously crossing out the days in my calendar that have already passed and reading a new best seller about office management called *Why It Works to Be a Jerk*, Jean buzzes in, announcing that Tim Price wants to talk, and fearfully I say, "Send him . . . in." Price strolls into the office . . . . I'm pretending to be on the phone. He sits down, across from me . . . . There's a smudge on his forehead or at least that's what I think I see. Aside from that he looks remarkably fit. Our conversation probably resembles something like this but is actually briefer.
>
> "Price," I say, shaking his hand. "Where have you been?"
>
> "Oh, just making the rounds." He smiles. "But hey, I'm back."
>
> "Far out." I shrug, confused. "How was . . . it?"
>
> "It was . . . surprising." He shrugs too. "It was . . . depressing."
>
> "I thought I saw you in Aspen," I murmur.
>
> "Hey, how are you, Bateman?" he asks.
>
> "I'm okay," I tell him, swallowing. "Just . . . existing." (*American Psycho* 384; my italics)

That he is only "pretty sure" that Price shows up and does so merely "for the sake of form" lends weight to the notion that Price is merely a formal feature of Bateman's psychotic occupational universe, one in which "[j]ust . . . existing" is a fraught matter. Patrick, like his doubles, ". . . is a cipher; a sign in language and it is in language that he disintegrates . . . . He is a textual impossibility, written out, elided until there is no 'Patrick' other than the sign or signifier that sets in motion the process that must destroy him" (Young 119). And the dread that Price's

reappearance elicits in Patrick suggests that his internal medium's presence poses a threat to his form of life.

Although Storey does not pursue this line of analysis, his insights into the Girardian inflections of the novel lend Price's return incredible import. If Price is—or once was—something like Patrick's Girardian "internal mediator," then the diegetic logic of his return betokens something significant about Patrick's mimetic economy. It is necessary to note that Price "goes off the rails" of the Tunnel night club and disappears just before Patrick gravitates to Owen, the most perfect of all the iterations of the Bateman type within Patrick's occupational universe. Owen's perfection resides in his absolute emptiness. When Bateman tries to get to the bottom of how Owen procured the occupational Holy Grail, the Fisher account (another cipher, about which the reader never learns anything), Owen responds with empty phrases; subtended by nothing, he is figured as the most crystalline empty vessel—entirely self-identical with his occupational persona. Price, on the other hand, maintains a kernel of authenticity, maintaining that some essential self resides beneath his cynical manipulation of others. At the beginning of the novel, Patrick announces his avowed political beliefs to the group:

> Well, we have to end apartheid for one. And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger. Ensure a strong national defense, prevent the spread of communism in Central America, work for a Middle East peace settlement, prevent U.S. military involvement overseas . . . . Better and more affordable long-term care for the elderly, control and find a cure for the AIDS epidemic, clean up environmental damage from toxic waste and pollution, ... strengthen laws to crack down on crime and illegal drugs. We also have to ensure

> that college education is affordable for the middle class and protect Social Security for senior citizens plus conserve natural resources and wilderness areas and reduce the influence of political action committees . . . . (*American Psycho* 15)

Storey points out that Patrick's speech is little more than a regurgitated "string of campaign sound bites" (Storey 61). Price is incredulous because Bateman's claims are so disingenuous, so contradictory that it would appear there is no way that, deep down, Patrick could earnestly believe in them. But there is, as Patrick acknowledges in one of the novel's rare apostrophic moments, no interiority or even reality to Patrick Bateman: ". . . there is," according to Patrick, "an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there" (*American Psycho* 377). The passage continues to unfurl Patrick's "inner" experience of non-existence:

> It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist . . . . All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed …. [N]o one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless

> . . . . Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do? . . . I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this . . . there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling . . . . (*American Psycho* 377)

Patrick is a "noncontingent human being"; that is to say, there is nothing personal or spontaneous about him; his "postmodern" subjectivity harbours "no deeper knowledge." This is because he is the unagentive, reified (which is to say asubjective), fabricated cumulative medial byproduct of the "Spirit of the Age." He does not exist because he is an abstraction, the distilled crystallization of the callous systemic violence of Reagan's America gone "off the rails."

3.8 Ontogeny Recapitulates Reagonomy

Even if one paid lip service to these bromides in the outside world, when addressing the homosocial inner sanctum of their occupational world, he would, according to Price's code of conduct, acknowledge his duplicity and mendacity. Price routinely lies and distorts the truth to "others," like the women he manipulates into sleeping with him (*American Psycho* 53). But, separating himself by a razor-thin margin from Price's cynical self-withdrawal (and self-preservation) from the enunciated content of his utterances, Bateman has no interiority per se. He is a pure product of ideology and harbours no cynical, self-preserving minimal distance from the Reaganesque talking points that he propounds and identifies with in spite of their internal contradictions and ultimate irreconcilability with his drug-abusing, murderous lifestyle. "Price," concludes Murphet, "wants to feel, perhaps does feel outrage that the gap between appearance

and reality in politics is widening" (Murphet 54). Whether it is due to cognitive impairment or a rational choice to disavow his hypocrisy (though hypocrisy is perhaps the ultimate conservative red herring), Bateman, like Reagan and Trump, manages to straddle that chasm more or less without compunction (and even when pangs of something resembling conscience emerge, they are echolocated in his VCR rather than inside of an internal psyche).

As a synecdoche for the obscene undergirdings of Reagan's America, he is also necessarily a crucible of its absurdity. Evidence of this relation peppers the text of the novel. Patrick is so consubstantial with the Reagan ethos that he is frequently figured as recapitulating it. When he, Reeves, and Hamlin are discussing their attitude towards panhandling "beggars," Patrick quips, "Just say no," regurgitating the notorious refrain from the 1980's Ronald and Nancy Reagan anti-drug campaign. And, in Patrick's case, the injunctions to both abstention and labour are as hypocritical as Price deems Reagan to be; Patrick, in a drug-fueled frenzy, repeats the line to Jean over the phone; he employs the phrase again when reflecting on whether anyone else would be able to see the smudged Price; the refrain also bubbles to the surface at the very end of the novel, as an unattributed punchline to a seemingly incoherent joke (Mandel 9-10).

Though the representational import of this passage is never commented upon by prominent critics, one of Patrick's grisly murders recapitulates a significant episode that took place at the beginning of the Reagan era. Patrick is preoccupied with Japan's ascendance as a capitalist rival to America: "They've bought the Empire State Building and Nell's" (*American Psycho* 180), claims Murphy, which moves Patrick to act on this mimetic rivalry, murdering a person whom he thinks is a Japanese food delivery boy, only to discover that he is, in fact, "the wrong type of Asian" (*American Psycho* 181), a Chinese boy delivering Chinese food. This scene is eerily echoic of an incident that actually transpired in 1982 in Highland Park, Michigan,

where two Chrysler plant workers murdered Chinese-American Vincent Chin, whom they mistook for Japanese, purportedly yelling at him, "It's because of you little motherfuckers that we're out of work!" ("Murder of Vincent Chin"). Insofar as Patrick's reconstitution of the ethos of Reagan's America operates as satire, it speaks to the psychotic consequences of taking these scripts of clean living and American industrial capitalist pre-eminence to their violent end points. As such, Patrick's violent disdain for underclasses, like the Chrysler factory workers' murder of Vincent Chin, resonates as the autoimmunitary (i.e., incapable of distinguishing inside from outside, body politic from invader) spasms of, to borrow a phrase from *White Noise*, an "American environment" past its prime. Hindsight confirms that Bateman's America is a no-longer-ascendant civilization that has begun, in the words of historian of the rise and fall of civilizations Arnold J. Toynbee, to succumb to "the mechanicalness of mimesis" and "failure of self-determination" (Toynbee 275) as it is surpassed by more dynamic rival civilizations, like Japan and China.

At the end of the novel, Patrick and his friends are all watching Bush Sr.'s inauguration and Price is particularly transfixed by Reagan's Iran-Contra quasi *mea culpa* speech. He is aghast at their collective external mediator's duplicity. As Price sees it, Reagan has betrayed his mimetic acolytes and the nation and is either lying through his teeth to his devotees or else he is cognitively impaired enough to believe the talking points he is reading from. Either way, Reagan's speech, for Price, betrays an unforgivable lack of integrity towards those who have given him their mimetic fidelity and situated him as their ultimate metasite of veridiction. "How can he lie like that? How can he pull that shit?" (*American Psycho* 397). The answer to this query, according to Murphet, is that "like Bateman himself, Reagan is the 'psycho' of the novel's title, selling arms to Iran to back genocide in Nicaragua" (Murphet 54). Thus, Patrick, who

serves as Reaganomics' channeler (in both the mediatic and daimonic sense), is unfazed by his external medium's perfidy. After all, observes Bateman, "Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface, was all that anyone found meaning in . . . this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged . . . " (*American Psycho* 375).

"The emancipated living cell formulates a concept of the minimal architectural and sanitary conditions necessary for autonomy . . . . Thus, in a complete apartment, the means for a circadian self-care cycle must be made . . . . This single bubble in a "living foam" forms a container for the self-relationships of the occupant, who establishes himself in his living unit as the consumer of its primary comforts: for him, the vital capsule of the apartment serves as the stage for his self-pairing, as the operating room for his self-care, and as an immune system in a highly contaminated field of 'connected isolations,' also known as 'neighborhoods'."

- Peter Sloterdijk

Chapter Four: *Fight Club*: Tyler Durden's Reign of Error

Like its generic predecessor, *White Noise*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* follows the travails of an American white male protagonist whose occupational universe—encompassing his job, domestic life, and modes of recreation—is organized around conducting, in Žižekian terms, a subjectively peaceful normative masculine existence. This tranquil form of life, situated within the confines of a densely-woven turn-of-the-millennium American late-capitalist milieu, arrives at the end of its programmatic tether, engendering a *re-medial* cascade of illness, violence, and disorientation – the very effects these occupational spheres of activity are putatively organized around staving off. Like *White Noise* and *American Psycho*, the diegetic universe of *Fight Club* is a "paratactic" one under conditions of emerging digital capitalism; and, with the passage of time, both the "postmodern parataxes" and the digital coordinates of the rhetorical situation have intensified significantly. As in *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*'s normative urban white male and the violent criminal are inflections of the same psychotic personality structure. However, *pace* Patrick Bateman's trajectory, in *Fight Club*, the nameless protagonist is, at first,

schizophrenically split. Starting out as a subjectively peaceful, disembodied consumer, the violence subtending his disembodied Apollonian lifestyle erupts to the surface, first as viscerally emancipatory combat and then, increasingly, as supposedly "immediate" terrorist subjectivizations of the systemic violence his occupational life was organized around suppressing and legislating. But every new emancipatory plateau of immediacy and health *re-medially* engenders a new horizon of illness. At the beginning of the novel, when the unnamed first-person narrator seeks out medical treatment for his insomnia, the doctor tells him "Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong. Listen to your body" (19). In "A Generation of Men Without History," Krister Friday cites this advice as ". . . paradigmatic for the text's overt interest in masculine affliction and its etiology . . . . What the narrator discovers . . . is that this 'something larger' is a crisis of masculinity in contemporary American culture—a crisis that produces conspicuous symptoms and necessitates even more conspicuous remedies" (Friday 5). Given the myriad reverberations with its generic forebears and successors, it should come as no surprise that this succession of "conspicuous symptoms" and remedies unfurls in accordance with an occupational *re-medial* logic that requires meticulous unpacking.

In an epigraph at the beginning of her important essay "Hurt so Good*: Fight Club*, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism," critic Lynn Ta cites Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs*. Judge Schreber, whose autobiography is the subject of one of Freud's seminal case studies, underwent a nervous collapse that was, many critics speculate, symptomatic of "something larger" going on at his particular late nineteenth century *fin-de-siècle* moment, an epochal rupture for whose schismatic energies Schreber figures as a libidinal lightning rod. In his incisive account of the life and work of Daniel Paul Schreber, and subsequent treatments thereof,

Eric L. Santner makes the case that Schreber's mental breakdown was a consequence of a "crisis of investiture" at a juncture when he was called upon to occupy an office of patriarchal authority, as a Saxon court judge, at an acutely biopolitically-charged moment in Prussian—and world —history at the dawn of the twentieth century. In the words of Jacques Lacan, whose work is immensely influential for not just Santner and Ta but the majority of the cogent *Fight Club* criticism in circulation, for Schreber, "[i]t is the lack of the Law of the Father in that place which, by the hole that it opens up in the signified, sets off the cascade of reshapings of the signifier from which the increasing disaster of the imaginary proceeds" ("Position of the Unconscious" 217). Drawing on treatments of Schreber's autobiography by Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and Friedrich Kittler, in particular, Santner characterizes Schreber's schizophrenic breakdown and psychic transformation into a woman (his "unmanning" before God) as a logical consequence of the station he was called upon to occupy, as a Saxon court judge (the seat of "the Law of the Father"), in the emerging 20th century mediatic regime (a labyrinthine assemblage conducing itself through telegraphy, telephony, gramophonics, film, and the typewriter), what Friedrich Kittler refers to as "Discourse Network 1900." Though she does not explicitly pursue these connections in detail, Ta's epigraph gestures to the fraught biopolitical station occupied by the protagonist of *Fight Club*, and his roles as a corporate insurance adjuster and consummate consumer in the milieu of digital capitalism.

4.1 Homegrown Error

Fight Club's nameless protagonist, whom some critics refer to as "Joe" (in reference to the imaginary subject of the body part books series [fragmented and mediated] within which he situates his plight later in the novel), lives in a hermetically-sealed high-rise condominium:

> . . . a sort of *filing cabinet* for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned-up television. A foot of concrete and air conditioning, you couldn't open the windows so even with maple flooring and dimmer switches, all seventeen hundred airtight feet would smell like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom. (*FC* 41; my italics)

Like Jack Gladney and the Swede, Joe has installed himself in an immunized dwelling, one ostensibly fortified against unwelcome intrusions from the outside, from his neighbours (many of whom dwell in their own vacuum-packed filing cabinets). And, also like the aforementioned protagonists, the domestic psycho-immunitary logic underwriting his autonomy is inherently flawed, as it is all too permeable to, and even constituted by, heteronomous corporate forces beyond his control. Joe, whose "filing cabinet" is filled with IKEA merchandise, characterizes himself as a "slave to [his] nesting instinct" (*FC* 43). In this regard, his effeminization is evidently typical: "The people [he] know[s] who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (*FC* 43). Joe's account of the contemporary mediation of masculine gender roles and sexuality figures his lifestyle as indentured to an effeminizing late capitalist order, an episteme that has supplanted the obscene

fetishistic images that once transfixed a chauvinist heteronormative version of twentieth-century masculine sexuality with the mass-produced *commodity fetishes* such as those disseminated through corporate furniture catalogues. Not only does this new libidinal economy (taking "economy" in a very literal late-capitalist sense of the term) effectively emasculate the would-be rugged male, it constitutes the very condition of possibility of his form of subjectivity by presenting a surfeit of false choices, what Diken and Laustsen refer to as an excessive "pseudo-freedom" (Diken and Laustsen 4), between equally generic consumer goods, patched together into a supposed primrose path to "the Good life." Though the circuit of these product choices within the milieu of what Microsoft-founder Bill Gates has termed "friction-free capitalism" (Diken and Laustsen 3) creates the illusion of unprecedented freedom, it dehumanizes the consumer by reducing "all personal identification to brand names and commercial transactions" (Kavadlo 13; qtd. in Simmons and Allen 116). Peter Mathews suggests that "Palahniuk depicts a recurring mainstream pattern of passive consumption in which life is lived out as a narrow set of default options" (Mathews 83). The flipside of this "passive consumption" under illusory conditions of free choice, observe Simmons and Allen, is a susceptibility to and even an eerie ventriloquism by the algorithmic logic of a more contemporary variant of Adorno and Horkheimer's "Culture Industry." Simmons and Allen characterize this culture industry as "a system predicated on a fascist desire to move towards the complete homogenization of the individual" (116), an industry that reduces Joe to a disempowered instrument of capital, a liquidated subject who has been trained to pursue "the Good life" through the proper consumption of consumer goods. This transformation is not without side-effects, as it results in a monstrous metamorphosis of desire, attention, volition, and cognition in an emerging "Society of

Control." This society is not unlike the one that Jack Gladney attempts to navigate, except, for Joe, even more so than for the Swede, the issue of imperiled masculinity is front and centre.

Expressing a measure of reflexivity about his life of ostensive effeminization and enslavement, Joe reflects,

> It took my whole life to buy this stuff.
>
> My Steg nesting tables.
>
> You buy furniture . . . . The drapes. The rug.
>
> Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (*FC* 44)

Joe, like Jack Gladney before him, has become morbidly encumbered by his appurtenances. He now begins to view the purchases that have so preoccupied him, of consumer goods meant to insulate and complete him, as exercising an insidious power over his life. Accordingly, drawing on the work of Susan Faludi and Judith Butler, Lynn Ta sees in Joe a flashpoint of the contemporary American "transition from a manufacture-based economy to an information-based market, . . . transforming white middle-class working men from a vehicle of production to a womanish receptacle of consumption" (Ta 266). Joe's chiasmic anadiplosis ("the things you used to own, now they own you") articulates the heightened agency of the consumer goods that constitute his effeminate environment, his nest, and suggests an awakening to the emasculating autoimmunitary operations of his protective consumer bubble. Through these optics, Joe's life, like the lives of this genre's other protagonists, figures as a locus of epochal activities, including

a rapidly-changing libidinal marketplace at the end of the twentieth century. Accordingly, his trajectory and metamorphoses are, in large part, organized around (e)rectifying this disorder and reasserting his manhood.

4.2 Consumption: Uncoordinated Occupations

Above and beyond the crucial insight that Joe's passive participation in consumerism has, in a sense, become his primary occupation, it is necessary to emphasize the extent to which his domestic and work spheres are consubstantial. Just as his hermetically-sealed domestic abode is a bleak, corporately-assembled "filing cabinet," his work life is organized around an innocuous IKEA-like ornamental aesthetic, as indexed by his bemused account of his boss's conversation with a Microsoft executive (one of many indexes of the creeping impact of Discourse Network 2000 on the quotidian contours of existence) about "how he chose a particular shade of pale cornflower blue for an icon" (*FC* 49). Later in the novel, looking back on his trajectory, Joe remarks,

> I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn't see any way to change things.
>
> Only end them.
>
> I felt trapped.
>
> I was too complete.

I was too perfect.

I wanted a way out of my tiny life. (*FC* 172- 3)

The tininess of Joe's occupational life is two-fold. Not only does he live it out in self-enclosed "filing cabinet[s]" that induce an intense experience of solitude, even in a large city swarming with people, but his life is also cosmically insignificant, without grander purpose. His abject lifestyle is that of "a cubicle-dwelling, catalog-reading, condominium-dwelling consumer" (Kavadlo 106). In a fashion reminiscent of Jack Gladney's more comical experience of the "most photographed barn in America," Joe's hollowed-out, homogenous experience of "filing cabinet" existence is disorientingly simulacral. Through the lens of his insomnia, the mimetic logic of the office photocopier machine and the mass-produced goods his job and lifestyle have him attending to is universalized, rendering empirical experience "so far away, a copy of a copy of copy" (*FC* 97). As Olivia Burgess observes in "Revolutionary Bodies in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*," "Much like the mass-produced goods that typify his society, the narrator feels increasingly removed from an unmediated and fully experienced existence" (Burgess 270).

But there is another stratum of brutality and alienation folded into Joe's occupational experience. As a recall coordinator for an insurance company, his job is to callously monetize life and death according to a "liability formula":

Wherever I'm going, I'll be there to apply the formula. I'll keep the secret intact.

It's simple arithmetic.

It's a story problem.

If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall?

You take the population of vehicles in the field (*A*) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (*B*), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (*C*).

A times *B* times *C* equals *X*. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall.

If *X* is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt.

If *C* is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall.

Everywhere I go, there's the burned-up wadded-up shell of a car waiting for me. I know where all the skeletons are. Consider this my job security. (*FC* 30-1)

Though Joe's empirical experience of his occupational existence has been hitherto seamless, the "story problem" starts to unravel as it becomes increasingly difficult to "fetishistically disavow" the fact that he works for a voraciously "profit-driven and casually murderous corporation" (Burgess 271): "This dehumanizing and callous treatment of human life is indicative of a society where people are only as valuable as their capacity to consume. As an accommodating consumer,

the Narrator buys stuff for his apartment, ending up in the same situation as everyone else in his or her 'lovely nest'" (270).

Burgess continues, by extension, " . . . . [h]is city is itself of a dreary repetition of 'filing cabinet' apartments filled with the same mass-produced appliances. After years as a successful consumer, achieving that sublime state of trendiness attained through up-to-date accessories, the Narrator only feels empty" (270). This spiritual hollowness that Joe suffers from is the direct consequence of his *tout-court* colonization by the spirit of a corporate consumerism. Even more so than Gladney, Joe has had his "lust removed from nature," but, rather than altogether disappearing, it resurges and *re-mediates* itself through culture.

In "Acting Out is the Best Defense in *Fight Club*," Laurie Vickroy contends that this feeling of emptiness is actually tantamount to a form of post-traumatic stress disorder in response to the various traumas induced by the systemic and symbolic forms of violence folded into his subjectively peaceful milieu; perhaps the most devastating of these is Joe's occupation as a recall coordinator who is "exposed to potentially traumatic information such as his description of seeing people's legs cut off by exploding turbo chargers that the negligent company will not replace" (Vickroy 64). Joe's vantage point affords a uniquely horrific perspective on the reification and resulting disposability of human life within a corporate-colonized matrix that violently reduces every consumer to a mere number. This is a markedly schismatic position for him to occupy as both violent law-manipulating corporate-perpetrator and law-abiding consumer-victim of the insurance algorithm that cynically monetizes and marginalizes the value of life.

This acquired sense of self-esteem, it turns out, this belief that he is a "unique snowflake," is also far from unmediated. Tyler complains, "We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning that fact" (*FC* 166). Universalizing his own contingent upbringing in the mediastream, he asserts that the main reason why his generation was "raised on television" is that their fathers were absent. Joe muses,

> Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a *franchise*.
>
> What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women. (*FC* 50; my italics)

Joe's generation is a veritably fatherless society in which even family units take on the alienating structure of corporate enterprises. Acutely aware of this decline in paternal authority and mentorship, he has, on various occasions, attempted to rectify the matter by endeavouring to glean what we might call *enfranchising* wisdom from his absent father:

> My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him long distances and said, now what?
>
> My dad didn't know.

> When I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn't know, so he said, get married.
>
> I'm a thirty-year-old boy, and I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need. (*FC* 50)

Stuck in this *disenfranchised* rut, Joe's is precisely the kind of predicament Tyler inveighs against: “Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need” (*FC* 53).

4.3 Twelve-Step *Re-mediations*

Joe perceives his fatherless world as rudderless, effeminate, materialistic, and simulacral; and the alienated agitation this predicament induces manifests itself in his pathological insomnia. The disorder leads him to visit his doctor, who prescribes, however flippantly, that he visit some illness support groups to bear witness to people enduring "real pain." Taking this advice seriously, he visits a laundry list of groups in order to shine some light on his own comfort and privilege. Joe, however, derives an altogether different variety of sustenance from the groups, which wind up providing compensatory therapy for his emasculated, dehumanized state of mind. Zeroing in on "Remaining Men Together," a testicular cancer survivors' group, Joe finds, in the presence of fellow emasculated men, in a forum that highlights the fallibility and imperfection of the mortal body—as opposed to the generic “stock bodies” that the culture industry would have them cultivate and invest in—he is able to cry, to purge the affective toxins welling up inside of him: “The support groups provide a temporary "cure" for the Narrator, whose fleeting escapes

from dominant society recharge his excitement for life. Here, among the frail and outcast, the Narrator finds an alternative to the perfection or at least the pressure to maintain the appearance of perfection" (270). The disease therapy groups (for testicular cancer, brain dysfunction, parasites, . . .) all focus on the dying body: "These are unpleasant aspects of embodiment, but nevertheless they are reminders of the body's existence . . . . These nightly forays into death and dying allow the Narrator to create a fantasy world where he, too, is dying, and by dying he is able to continually reembrace life" (Burgess 270-1). Importantly, within the seemingly more immediate, embodied microcosm of "Remaining Men Together," Joe is able to reclaim his masculinity and his empathetic humanity; that is, until Marla arrives on the scene, mirroring back his own fakery. Like Joe, Marla is a mere "tourist" (*FC* 14), a "faker" (*FC* 35) who is not really dying. Joe can no longer cry in her presence:

> In this one moment, Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth. Everyone clinging and risking to share their worst fear, that their death is coming head-on and the barrel of a gun is pressed against the back of their throats. Well, Marla is smoking and rolling her eyes, and me, I'm buried under a sobbing carpet, and all of a sudden even death and dying rank right down there with plastic flowers on video as a non-event. (*FC* 23)

Marla's intrusion reminds Joe that his pursuit of authenticity is itself a false imitation. Joe is not sick, at least not in the sense that his fellow group members are, ". . . but he can copy being sick . . . . [Joe] is looking to feel 'alive' in a society where life and death have become inseparable

from images compounded on images, . . . plastic flowers on video" (Burgess 271). Achieving catharsis away from the dominion of the dissembling mediasphere, it turns out, is not going to be as easy as commiserating with other, more legitimate castrati. To elaborate on his doctor's vague diagnosis, Joe's brand of symbolic castration is the product of a more simulacral *Unbehagen*, a pervasive occupational *dis-ease* of which his insomnia is merely a localized symptom.

Though Joe is quick to scapegoat Marla for his acute experience of imposture, the tectonic plates underlying "Remaining Men Together" were already rapidly in motion well before her arrival. Indeed, Marla's appearance may very well be a psycho-tropic product of this seismic activity. Given that, at the end of the novel, it turns out that Joe is in a mental hospital and everything about his account is unreliable, including Marla's existence, it is surprising that many critics are so credulous to her reality, even viewing her as Joe's paramount, however tenuous, "real-world touchstone" (Angel 52) and only savior (Kavadlo 8). Regardless of Marla's ontological status, attending the self-help groups turns out to be a deeply-flawed enterprise for Joe. For one thing, in spite of the cathartic aspect of the (however fraudulent) intimacy Joe is able to experience in the gatherings, part of the therapy involves the promulgation of New Age disavowal of the life of the body:

> Eyes closed, we imagined our pain as a ball of white healing light floating around our feet and rising to our knees, our waist, our chest. Our chakras opening. The heart chakra, the head chakra. Chloe talked us into caves where we met our power animal. Mine was a penguin.

> Ice covered the floor of the cave, and the penguin said slide. Without any effort, we slide through tunnels and galleries.
>
> Then it was time to hug . . . . This was therapeutic physical contact, Chloe said. (*FC* 20)

Despite the therapeutic effects of this phantasmal relocation of the spirit, erasure of the mortal body and its limits, and reconstitution of the occupational lifeworld, this form of New Age therapy adds another layer of dissimulation to Joe's already simulacral experience. The fragmenting dis-semblance of his body into chakras and relocation of his soul within a frictionless, painless metaphysical milieu compounds as many of Joe's issues as it purports to dissolve, given his pursuit of authentic immediacy.

Joe's first experience of emotional release at these groups is in "Remaining Men Together," in a gender-bending embrace with Bob, whose large breasts and loving embrace figure him as an ersatz mother within what is supposed to be a strictly homosocial community:

> Big Bob was a juicer, he said. All those salad days on Dianabol and then the racehorse steroid, Wistrol. His own gym, Big Bob owned a gym. He'd been married three times. He'd done product endorsements, and had I seen him on television, ever? The whole how-to-program about expanding your chest was practically his invention.
>
> Strangers with this kind of honesty make me go a big rubbery one, if you know what I mean.

> Bob didn't know. Maybe only one of his huevos had ever descended, and he knew this was a risk factor. Bob told me about post-operative hormone therapy.
>
> A lot of bodybuilders shooting too much testosterone would get what they called bitch tits.
>
> I had to ask what Bob meant by huevos.
>
> Huevos, Bob said. Gonads. Nuts. Jewels. Testes. Balls. In Mexico, where you buy your steroids, they call them "eggs." (*FC* 21)

In "Violence, Space, Fragmenting Consciousness," James Giles observes that Bob, who has had his cancerous testicles removed before meeting Joe at Remaining Men Together, "functions as an ironic embodiment of the narrator's own fear of emasculation" (31). Though this is a trenchant observation about Bob's status in the narrative, Bob figures as much more than an embodiment of Joe's concerns about remaining a normative man. His account of his own trajectory mirrors and figures as a metonym for Joe's entire *re-medial* occupational itinerary. Seduced by idealized media images of the "beautiful stock body" (*FC* 48), Bob has pursued this commodifying hypermasculine ideal with dogged determination and the assistance of a rich pharmacopeia. But the steroids and hormones that he has consumed have ruined his health, dashed his family against the rocks, effeminized him with "bitch tits," and, ultimately, induced semi-castration; even the putative biological loci of his manhood, his testicles, are wounded, regendered, reraced, and even assigned a different species as "eggs" and "huevos." Bob's vain efforts to hypermasculate himself result in a new form of effeminization, an emblematic narrative arc that imperils the very possibility of "Remaining Men Together."

4.4 Après-coup: Spliced Frames of Reference

If Marla's insistent co-presence and Bob's effeminization betoken the impossibility of properly remasculating and rejoining humanity, "remaining men together," through the disease support groups, Joe—or, rather, Joe's unconscious —is left with no choice but to devise a new strategy to (e)rectify his "big rubbery one." It is at this moment, in the face of this exigency, that he meets his alter ego Tyler Durden. Tyler's occupations require careful scrutiny, as they emerge out from the *re-medial* remasculating logic.

When Tyler first enters the picture, he has two primary occupations. He is a banquet waiter at a downtown hotel and a film projectionist. In both occupations he engages in small-scale guerilla vandalism, of a sort. As a banquet waiter, he routinely engages in "dinner party sabot[age]" (*FC* 81), sticking his erect penis in, urinating in, and flatulating on banquet food before it is served to eminent guests like "the Empire State Lawyers" (*FC* 80). As a projectionist, Tyler's favourite pastime is splicing pornographic images of penises into mainstream films. He starts with a children's cartoon and then

> Tyler spliced a penis into everything after that. Usually, close-ups . . . four stories tall and twitching with blood pressure as Cinderella danced with her Prince Charming and people watched. Nobody complained. People ate and drank, but the evening wasn't the same. People feel sick or start to cry and don't know why. (*FC* 31)

In "A Generation of Men without History," Krister Friday asserts that Tyler's "pornographic intrusion[s]" (Friday 3) "encapsulat[es] *Fight Club*'s narrative logic and its complex imaginative imbrication of identity and historical self-consciousness. For what Tyler inserts is a single, subliminal frame that represents a moment of masculine prowess" (Friday 1). Looking to Sally Robinson's critical literary-gender-theoretical work on white masculinity in *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, Friday underscores the role of what Robinson refers to as a master narrative of "white male decline prevalent in post-sixties, white-male American fiction" (Robinson 2; qtd. in Friday 7): "Robinson argues that such narratives construct a notion of male victimization and its related symptomology [sic] as redress for a perceived political and social emasculation" (Friday 7); as such, they function as ". . . a way of compensating for a sense of disempowerment created by a contemporary culture in which the white male no longer occupies a central, unchallenged normative position" (7). Friday observes that this perception sets in motion a "compensatory trajectory" (Friday 7) of masculine reassertion, coding itself "in terms of the scandalous and the prohibited" (Friday 7), through which Joe/Tyler endeavours to overcome this crisis in white masculinity "through a redemptive recovery of male prowess . . . " under hostile conditions in which "any male identity that exists is simultaneously on the brink of extinction, not emergence" (Friday 12).

Thus, like Bob's hormonal therapy, the penis spliced into the Disney film serves as an even more explicitly medial figure for the fraught effort to reassert atavistic masculinity under what are perceived as the effete *re-medial* conditions of digital modernity. These severed and spliced penises are, Cynthia Kuhn claims, just a few of many organs without bodies circulating through the text: "In *Fight Club*, fragmented bodies constantly serve as literal reminders and as

metaphorical responses to the complexities of negotiating cultural expectations" (39). Kuhn cites Project Mayhem's castration threats, Marla's reassurances that her dildo will not replace him, and the narrator's references to himself as individual body parts all as instances of bodily disintegration, ". . . reflect[ing] his psychic disintegration, crossing from biological—'I am totally Joe's Gallbladder' (49)—to emotive territory: 'I am Joe's Boiling Point' (62). In this latter move, sentiment appears to be unsuitable in 'masculine' terms unless splintered and proffered in a sarcastic way" (Kuhn 40). Though Joe/Tyler inserts the spliced penises, which Kuhn refers to as "cinematic vivisections" (39), to reassert his masculinity and "'giv[e] the finger' to mainstream consumerist society" (Giles 28), the narrative logic of these operations only further fragments and disenfranchises him as he struggles to put himself back together again through a succession of fragmentary splices. He is, in effect, the ultimate object of his many "symbolically castrating" medial "vivisections."

4.5 *Remanning* Men Apart

In Tyler's fight club, Joe finds a useful counterpoint to his symbolically-castrating occupational universe. Fight club is, in a sense, the sublation of his subjectively peaceful but systemically and symbolically violent occupation; it is Joe's first conscious effort to negate his disavowal of subjective violence by embracing it. In the wake of the support groups' viability as vehicles to help Joe "feel alive," he finds, as it were, *a new lease on life* in fight club. Like the support groups, fight club seizes upon embodiment in the form of "therapeutic physical contact" as a means of connecting with other men and escaping from his moribund lifestyle. But, unlike the support groups, fight club does not rely upon tranquil new age virtualities to escape from the

mortal body and its susceptibility to pain. Rather, it involves a radical embrace of the emancipatory potentials of pain and violence:

> You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club. When it's you and one other guy under that one light in the middle of all those watching. Fight club isn't about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn't about words. You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle anything. There's grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday . . . you feel saved. (*FC* 51)

Unlike the consumer culture image of masculinity proffered by the likes of Bob, fight club figures a rugged masculinity through the more immediate experience of combat in a hermetically-sealed subaltern venue that eschews mass culture's emasculating emphasis on the superficial sheen of commodifiable images.

Again, on the topic of fight club's rugged immediacy as a corrective to the Culture Industry's injunctions, Joe notes,

> I don't want to die without a few scars . . . . It's nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body. You see those cars that are completely stock cherry, right out of a dealer's showroom in 1955, I always think what a waste . . . . It used to

> be enough that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn't toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I'd be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and car. Really, really nice, until the dust settled or the next owner. Nothing is static. Even the Mona Lisa is falling apart. Since fight club, I can wiggle half the teeth in my jaw.
>
> Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer.
>
> Tyler never knew his father.
>
> Maybe self-destruction is the answer. (*FC* 48-49)

Fight club is framed as a violent negation of the imperious commodification of the emasculated male's "stock body," whose suffering the club "sublate[s] into affirmative joy" (Diken and Laustsen 7), but the fact that Joe frames fight club as transforming the (presumably white) "loaf of bread" and cherry "stock body" into something "carved out of wood" should give the critical reader pause, as this is not the first wood to go under the knife in this text.

4.6 Invisible Fist of the Market

The notion of men "carved out of wood" also seems to allude to Joe's first meeting with Tyler, who is gathering driftwood on the beach to build a rarefied sundial, of sorts, one that projects a spectral hand at precisely 4:30 pm. This quasi-buddhistic exercise in evanescence, and the first of Joe/Tyler's medial vivisections, serves as a Dionysian counterpoint to Joe's life-long Apollonian project of fabricating his self-image and making himself whole through the right purchases. Tyler's wooden construction, which the sun fleetingly mediates into a human hand

and then a kind of inhuman "Nosferatu" hand, in turn invokes the scene at the very opening of the novel in which Tyler tells Joe they'll be the stuff of legend and live forever, to which Joe responds "you're thinking of vampires" (*FC* 12). Thus, this prehensile "organ without a body," like the hand tropes that permeate *American Pastoral*, would seem to serve as a metonym for the monstrous *re-medial* economy within which Joe finds himself as he struggles to occupy a subject position that makes him feel immediate, human, and alive. Inasmuch as fight club fashions men into putatively agentive erections that are immune to the commodifying, effeminizing, dehumanizing tendencies of late twentieth century American culture, it also *re-mediates* their precarious "wood," reinscribing it within an ever-unfolding and castrating socio-symbolic matrix.[54]

When fight club is still in its infancy, Joe would like to believe that it is an immediate panacea to the *pharmakon* of passively-consumed hypermediated violence:

> Fight club is not football on television. You aren't watching a bunch of men you don't know halfway around the world beating on each other live by satellite with a two-minute delay, commercials pitching beer every ten minutes, and a pause now for station identification. After you've been to fight club, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex. (*FC* 50)

And yet, Joe himself chooses to consume and create pornography when he "could be having great sex" with Marla (a traditionally heteronormative undertaking so unpalatable that he can only mediate it through Tyler). In fact, Joe's own account of fight club's constitutive mediacy flies in the face of any pretenses of immediacy:

> Like every guy on his first night in fight club, I breathed in and swung my fist in a roundhouse at Tyler's jaw like in every cowboy movie we'd ever seen, and me, my fist connected with the side of Tyler's neck.
>
> Shit, I said, that didn't count. I want to try it again.
>
> Tyler said, "Yeah it counted," and hit me, straight on, pow, just like a cartoon boxing glove on a spring on Saturday morning cartoons, right in the middle of my chest and I fell back against a car. We both stood there, Tyler rubbing the side of his neck and me holding a hand on my chest, both of us knowing we'd gotten somewhere we'd never been and like the cat and mouse in cartoons, we were still alive and wanted to see how far we could take this thing and still be alive . . . .
>
> I said, hit me again.
>
> Tyler said, "No, you hit me."
>
> So I hit him . . . . What happened next and after that didn't happen in words. (*FC* 53)

Even in the process of valorizing fight club for its presymbolic immediacy, Joe makes it clear that the fight club's strong, silent figuration of "live" masculinity is enabled by the lifelong diet of fictional images that Joe has consumed in Westerns and cartoons. This suggests that his persistent efforts to splice his virtual phallus into his occupational universe are always going to be spooled into even more simulacrally castrating productions.

Cynthia Kuhn further notes that fight club members' attempts to ". . . become "men" are hindered by taking cues from cultural representations of 'masculinity' rather than from an intimate relationship with a father figure . . . . [T]hey have been left to deal with the consequences of paternal sin—i.e., abandonment—and feeling lost in the figurative ancestral curse" (Kuhn 38). Indeed, the absent father figure is precisely in the crosshairs of Tyler's project: "Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too scared to fight. After a few fights, you're afraid a lot less" (*FC* 54); when Joe asks Tyler what he is fighting, "Tyler sa(ys), his father" (*FC* 53). Once again, in spite of the illusion of immediacy that it fosters, fight club proves itself to be unavoidably mediated; in addition to its other medial valences, fight club serves as a kind of confrontational simulation, a testing ground for and displacement of a thoroughly Oedipal paternal confrontation that can never take place in reality.

4.7 Occupy Wall Street: Drone Warfare

As fight club takes over his life, Joe directs more and more hostility towards his workplace. In addition to brandishing his bloody wounds as a mark of pride, he starts to compose and disseminate dissident missives:

> The hole punched through my cheek doesn't ever heal. I'm going to work, and my punched-out eye sockets are two swollen up black bagels around the little piss holes I have to see through. Until today, it really pissed me off that I'd become this totally centered Zen Master and nobody had noticed. Still, I'm doing the little FAX thing. I write little HAIKU things and FAX them around to everyone. When

> I pass people in the hall at work, I get totally ZEN right in everyone's hostile little FACE. (*FC* 63)

This antagonistic behaviour towards Joe's coworkers and employer is a response to the systemic violence of what he perceives as wage slavery on his life. It is noteworthy that this confrontation takes the form of a *re*-mediation—through the medium of the FAX machine—of the Buddhist themes Joe encountered in his New Age therapy support group sessions. But in its reconstituted form, far from concealing or attenuating the frictions of capitalism, this buddhistic wisdom is being parlayed into a modality of self-styled Zen mastery meant to amplify these frictions.[55]

One of Joe's antagonistic FAX Haikus reads:

> Worker bees can leave
> Even drones can fly away
> The queen is their slave. (*FC* 63)

Another, which he composes in his head in response to his boss's questions about the blood on his face, is a ruminative piece about the occupation:

> Without just one nest
> A bird can call the world home
> Life is your career (*FC* 64)

Whereas the support group's New Age meditation was meant to be a soothing balm to make life as it is more tolerable, this newfound experience of Zen enlightenment, however ironically Joe

may perceive it, is a call to insurrection against the hegemony of his occupational universe. But it is by no means clear who the proper recipients of his *re-medial* messages are. They could be intended for his own meditative edification, his coworkers, and/or his employer. But given that these faxes are, like the photocopies circulating through the office, emblematic of a simulacral symbolic economy, he may well be hallucinating everything about this episode. Regardless, this call to dissidence against and transcendence of the bounds of the occupation gesture towards the next metamorphosis of fight club into Project Mayhem.

Commenting on the spread of fight club and its connection to his workplace, Joe observes,

> Now I go to meetings or conferences and see faces at conference tables, accountants and junior executives or attorneys with broken noses spreading out like an eggplant under the edges of bandages or they have a couple stitches under an eye or a jaw wired shut. These are the quiet young men who listen until it's time to decide. (*FC* 54)

Perhaps in response to the fight club enthusiasts' obtrusive battle scars, Joe's boss quips that "there are fewer and fewer gentlemen in business and more thugs" (*FC* 54). For Giles, such ". . . images of badly mutilated young men at business conferences constitute an early clue of the fundamental unreality of fight club. Obviously, no corporation would retain such employees, much less send them to high-level conferences" (Giles 36). Giles continues, there is a much-overlooked irony to the boss's assertion that there is a ". . . decreasing number of gentlemen in business. The boss, off course, is one of the individuals who decide not to issue recalls, even

when the lives of consumers are endangered. He, like those above him on the corporate ladder, is himself a dangerous thug, no matter the decency of his public appearance" (Giles 36). Fight club, then, renders visible Joe's experience of his corporation's perpetration of far-reaching systemic violence on others and himself. And, once again, though he is attempting to mobilize what Žižek calls "subjective violence" in the direction of agency (or "Zen" mastery), his bruises bespeak the traumatic spiritual beatings that he has received by way of his collusion in this corporate necropolitical matrix.

For Žižek, whose work on *Fight Club* focuses on David Fincher's film adaptation, Joe's masochistic confrontation with his boss,[56] is critical because it takes the disempowered employee one step closer to an uncanny form of agency:

> To blackmail his boss . . . the hero throws himself around the man's office, beating himself bloody . . . . In front of his embarrassed boss, the narrator thus enacts upon himself the boss' aggression toward him . . . . The self-beating begins with the hero's hand acquiring a life of its own, escaping the hero's control—in short, turning into a partial object, or, to put it in Deleuze's terms, into *an organ without a body* (the obverse of the *body without organs*). This provides the key to the double with whom . . . the hero is fighting. His double, the hero's Ideal-Ego, a spectral/invisible hallucinatory entity—not simply external to the hero. Its efficacy is inscribed within the hero's body itself as the autonomization of one of its organs (hand). The hand acting on its own is the drive ignoring the dialectic of the subject's desire: drive is fundamentally the insistence of an undead "organ without a body," standing, like Lacan's *lamella*, for that which the subject had to

> lose in order to subjectivize itself in the symbolic space of the sexual difference. (*Organs* 173-4)

Žižek 's analysis locates many of the ironic coordinates of the scene: Joe deliberately dissembles that his boss is beating him up by simultaneously occupying the roles of beater and beaten; according to Žižek, this is a fundamentally masochistic revolutionary gesture. By choreographing the scene and occupying both roles, he transitions from being an unreflective instrument of the callous capitalist system to a usurper of its monopoly on legitimate violence:

> So when [Joe] beats himself up in front of his boss, his message to the boss is: "I know you want to beat me, but you see, your desire to beat me is also my desire, so if you were to beat me, you would be fulfilling the role of the servant of my perverse masochistic desire. But you're too much of a coward to act out your desire, so I'll do it for you—here it is, you've got what you really wanted. Why are you so embarrassed? Aren't you ready to accept it?" The gap between fantasy and reality is crucial here: the boss, of course, would never actually have beaten [Joe] up, he was merely fantasizing about doing it, and the painful effect of [Joe's] self-beating hinges on the very fact that he stages the content of the secret fantasy his boss would never be able to actualize.
>
> Paradoxically, such a staging is the first act of liberation: by means of it, the servant's masochistic libidinal attachment to his master is brought to light, and the servant thus acquires a minimal distance towards it. Even on a purely formal level, the fact of beating oneself up reveals the simple fact that the master is

> superfluous: "Who needs you to terrorize me? I can do it myself!" So it is only through the first beating up (hitting) oneself that one becomes free: the true goal of this beating is to beat out that in me which attaches me to the master. (*Revolution* 251-2)

As he correctly observes, the masochistic gesture begins with Joe's expropriation of the boss' systemically violent control over of him: in the novel, Joe begins the episode with a phone call to the city desk of a local newspaper to confess, in front of his employer, to the disgusting guerilla vandalism that he has been engaging in at the hotel, claiming to have " . . . committed a terrible crime against humanity as part of a political protest . . . over the exploitation of workers in the service industry" (*FC* 115). By confessing to his "protest" and punching himself, he transfigures the systemic violence to which he has been submitted into "subjective" (i.e., visible) violence; but there is a flaw in Žižek's reading, especially as applied to the novel, in that the episode at the Pressman Hotel ends, not merely with Joe's assumption of the position of mastery, but with a monstrous agency bubbling to the surface:

> I punch myself again, again. It just looks good, all the blood, but I throw myself back against the wall to make a terrible noise and break the painting that hangs there.
>
> The broken glass and frame and the painting of flowers and blood go to the floor with me clowning around . . . . Blood gets on the carpet and I reach up and grip *monster handprints* of blood on the edge of the hotel manager's desk and say, please, help me . . .

> Please don't hit me, again.
>
> I slip back to the floor and crawl my blood across the carpet . . . . *The monster drags itself* across the lovely bouquets and garlands of the Oriental carpet . . . . And this is how Tyler was free to start a fight club every night of the week . . . . *The monster hooks its bloody claw* in the waistband of the manager's pants, and pulls itself up to clutch the white starched shirt, and I wrap my bloody hands around the manager's smooth wrists. (*FC* 116-7; my italics)

Joe's effort to violently assert his own masculine agency in this constitutively mediatized violent space, in turn, *re-medially* vivisects his hand into something monstrous, the *lamella* of a monstrous agency which violently occupies his subjectivity and transfigures fight club into Project Mayhem. "Violent excess," writes Giles "rather than controlling reason is the defining ingredient of . . . fight club. Such devotion to excess negates any possibility that the narrator will control the fantasy; in fact, as the novel progresses, it increasingly controls him" (Giles 35). Even though Žižek is astute to characterize Joe's behaviour as a masochistic gesture that empowers him to confront his boss and the occupational universe that he represents, his analysis overlooks how Joe's franchise takes on an undead life of its own as the fight clubs proliferate.

4.8 *Revillusions*

In its next metamorphosis, fight club, avers Giles, "extends beyond the promotion of simple fighting and assumes a broader mission, "Project Mayhem," the promotion of random acts of sabotage, primarily against corporations. "Project Mayhem" operates according to a set of

rules, promulgated of course by Tyler Durden, that mimic those of fight club itself" (Giles 36). "The first rule about Project Mayhem," announces Durden, "is that you don't ask questions about Project Mayhem" (*FC* 119). And, like the corporate world, Project Mayhem operates through committees. "That Project Mayhem is modeled on the corporate world demonstrates that the narrator has been so co-opted by that world that, ironically, he does not resist it in his fantasy of rebellion" (Giles 36). The description of Project Mayhem committees as "support groups. Sort of" (*FC* 119), thus contains "an important clue" (Giles 36) about the structure of the novel.

It therefore makes sense, observe Diken and Laustsen, to interpret Project Mayhem as a quasi-Hegelian stage of Joe's metamorphosis. In Project Mayhem, "Pain is sublated into terror when it is recognized that the solipsism of pain has the capitalist system as its frame. To cure one's pain one needs to demolish the system that creates it, which is the purpose of Project Mayhem" (Diken and Laustsen 7). However, when the violence is directed outwards, it becomes increasingly difficult to ". . . distinguish between fascism and benevolent terror" in the service of a greater cause: "The difference is the subject serving as the agent of violence. Does the subject heroically accept its role as a vanishing mediator? Does the revolutionary act transform the subject? Or, does it lay the ground for a regime of terror sustained by an unchanged subject?" (7-8).

In spite of Tyler's occasional anti-capitalist diatribes, Project Mayhem would seem to *re-mediate* the deleterious/invidious (violent, fascistic, homogenizing) tendencies of the dominant order against which it is presumably meant to be an insurgency. As such, it functions as a sort of negation of the original negation (i.e., fight club) of Joe's occupational life. Thus, despite Tyler's polemics against corporatism and consumerism, he is still possessed by their spirit:

> I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd never have . . . . Open the dump

> valves on supertankers and uncap offshore oil wells. I wanted to kill all the fish I couldn't afford to eat, and smother the French beaches I'd never see . . . .
> I wanted the whole world to hit bottom.
> . . . I really wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every endangered panda that wouldn't screw to save its species and every whale or dolphin that gave up and ran itself aground.
> Don't think of this as extinction. Think of this as downsizing. (*FC* 123-4)

This impulse, writes Kavadlo, amounts to the ". . . apolitical destruction of an apathetic world, a way for the powerless to fantasize about spiting nature" (Kavadlo 11). "The language," Kavadlo continues, "is still that of consumption—seeing fish as edible commodity, for example. He still employs the same consumerist thinking, only with the sentiments reversed: the obsession with acquisition has turned into a desire for its removal" (11). And, by the same token, the original desire to be an obedient employee has morphed into a desire to usurp the "downsizing" boss and occupy the position of the Master. But the new regime that this insurrection will give birth to still harbors— in *re-mediated* form—some of the most disturbing systemically violent aspects of the current dominant order.

4.9 God's Medial Children: Law of the Fodder

Joe's occupational universe and its relationship to the Law of the Father figure prominently in Project Mayhem. As this next stage begins to unfurl, the mechanic whom Joe encounters at the Paper street house recites some "Tyler Durden dogma" (*FC* 141):

> What you have to understand is your father was your model for God . . . . If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God? . . . . What you end up doing . . . is you spend your life searching for a father and God . . . . Burn the Louvre . . . and wipe your ass with the Mona Lisa. This way at least, God would know our names . . . . As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not who you tell yourself . . . . You're not your name. (*FC* 141-3)

This scripture and verse being ventriloquized through the mechanic induces in Joe a sense of déjà-vu as he surmises that it was "scrawled on bits of paper while [he] was asleep and given to [him] to type and photocopy at work . . . . [He has] read it all. Even [his] boss has probably read it all" (*FC* 141). Recalling the mantra, Joe adds "We are God's middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention" (*FC* 141). Tyler/Joe's aspiration to usurp the absolute Master figure, here figured as a flickering oscillation between God, his flesh-and-blood father, history, and his boss, is not as straight-forward as he would have his recruits believe. If the white, middle-class, Christian male recruits are rechristened as anonymous "space monkeys," then their individual names will never accrue the personal or historical significance that they strive after. They are, rather, experimental fodder for a great dissident experiment whose ultimate outcome is by no means clear, even to Tyler. What's more, the ambition to have "God . . . know [their] names" suggests that whatever stage in the Master-slave dialectic they manage to reach, there will always be a spectral Big Otherly agency under

whose panoptical scrutiny they are made to feel insignificant.

The mechanic continues with a screed that is "pure Tyler Turden" (*FC* 149):

> I see the strongest and the smartest men who have ever lived . . . and these men are pumping gas and waiting tables.
>
> If we could put these men in training camps and finish raising them. All a gun does is focus an explosion in one direction.
>
> You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need.
>
> We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression.
>
> We have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them, and show them courage by frightening them.
>
> Napoleon bragged that he could train men to sacrifice their lives for a scrap of ribbon.
>
> Imagine, when we call a strike and everyone refuses to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world.
>
> Imagine hunting elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. (*FC* 149-50)

The *re-medial* logic of this passage is, by now, clear. Project Mayhem, the strategy that was

formulated to remedy the crippling malaise of modernity by attacking and dismantling the dominant order, including Joe's workplace, the Culture Industry, and the capitalist order as a whole, seeks to reassert a new form of tyranny, with Tyler occupying the castrating Napoleonic position hitherto held by the hegemonic advertising industry. And even the nature of the dis-ease continues to morph. Joe's insomnia, which gave way to an array of fake illnesses, is now manifesting itself as a "depression," a veritable Jamesonian "waning of affect" on account of the lack of grand militarist narratives to marshal and unify the generation's jouissance, a niche that Project Mayhem has been carved out (of wood) to occupy. In the midst of a screed about how Project Mayhem is "going to save the world [by forcing] humanity to go dormant long enough for the Earth to recover," Tyler starts to tip his hand as to Project Mayhem's underpinnings: "'You justify anarchy,' Tyler says. 'You figure it out.'" (*FC* 125).

4.10 *Re-mediating* Terror

In accordance with the *re-medial* logic of *Fight Club*, Joe imagines the demolition of the Parker Morris-Building as a succession of film frames:

> The demolition team will hit the primary charge in maybe eight minutes. The primary charge will blow the base charge, the foundation columns will crumble, and the photo series of the Parker-Morris Building will go into all the History books. The five-picture time lapse series. Here the building's standing. Second picture, the building will be at an eighty-degree angle. Then a seventy-degree angle. The building's at a forty-five-degree-angle in the fourth picture when the skeleton starts to

> give and the tower gets a slight arch to it. The last shot, the tower, all one hundred and ninety-one floors, will slam down on the national museum which is Tyler's real target. (*FC* 14)

That these film frames will go into "all the History books" flies in the face of Project Mayhem's goal to annihilate "every scrap of history" (*FC* 12). Even if the museum is destroyed, the virtual archive will never simply disappear. Instead, all ruptures, however epochal, will to a certain extent be reinscribed—*re-mediated*—within history. Rather than regressing to a prehistoric era, Project Mayhem would, at best, alter the trajectory of history within the immanent framework of history, without according any significance to its individual "space monkey" perpetrators.

Also, as Friday observes, these frames gesture towards the "pornographic intrusions" at the beginning of the novel:

> A single frame in a movie is on the screen for one-sixtieth of a second. Divide a second into sixty equal parts. That's how long the erection is. Towering four stories tall over the popcorn auditorium, slippery red and terrible, and no one sees it. (*FC* 30; qtd. by Friday)

The "[t]owering" multi-story erection frame that Tyler splices into the children's film presages the culmination of the dialectic in Project Mayhem's demolition of the Parker-Morris Building and the whole narrative universe of *Fight Club* is unmoored from any pretense of a "God's eye view" or metahistorical position from which all the (actual and virtual) variables of the situation cohere in such a way that they can be mastered. The reader and Joe converge on the insight that

there is always another subliminal agency, another "frame of reference" whose interventions cannot be accounted for, even by the most comprehensive "liability formula."

4.11 Passion for the Reel

All of this brings into question the "reality" of *Fight Club*, a novel that is pre-eminently about the unreal experience of contemporary corporate American occupational existence. Given the intrinsic unreliability of everything that takes place, given its *a priori re-mediality*, nothing that Joe describes can be taken at face value. This conclusion is consolidated by an assessment of the complex tropological economy of the novel. Like the oscillating rhythms of castration and erection that circulate through the novel, there are other tropes littering this diegetic space, reinscribing themselves in such a way to create the sense of a claustrophobic self-enclosed system.[57] One such trope is the flowered wallpaper that pervades the novel. Marla, whose very presence at the self-help groups renders the experience as inauthentic as "plastic flowers on video," wears a dress with "a wallpaper pattern of dark roses." The house on Paper Street also has flowered wallpaper, a fact that must be reconsidered in light of Ronald Green's observation that a "paper street" is, by definition, a planned street that does not exist (Green 19). When combined with the other indications of Joe's unreliability as a narrator, the metastases of the Paper Street wallpaper suggest that not just the house and what happens within it but also Marla, and perhaps everything else that Joe presents to the reader, is the "non-event" product of a *re-medial* schizoid fantasy system: his narrative is a simulacral house of cards.[58]

By the same token, the itinerary of soap in the novel constitutes one of the most vertiginous and underanalyzed elements in *Fight Club*. Tyler uses lye and fat to make the soap

that he sells "back to the [wealthy women] who have paid to have it sucked out" (*FC* 150). When Tyler burns Joe's hands with a kiss and lye, it makes a "cigarette burn scar" (*FC* 76). Joe attempts to avoid the ensuing pain with a guided meditation on his youthful experience as a tourist in Ireland as Tyler lectures him about the origin of human sacrifice and the resulting invention of soap out of sacrificial remains.

Giles' insights into the nature of Joe's memories frames the issue in a useful light. Speculating that if Durden is the narrator's fantasy construct, Giles suggests that ". . . one can assume that the lecture about human sacrifice emerges out of the narrator's own consciousness as does his memory of an earlier time in Ireland. His recalling the time when he was initially drawn to anarchy and to little acts of violence constitutes the roots of Project Mayhem" (Giles 39-40). According to the novel's *re-medial* logic, as the cigarette burn scar takes on an undead existence of its own, it becomes "a kiss without a body" that signals membership in Project Mayhem and connection to Tyler's projects (Marla has one too). Another way in which this *re-medial* trope (like the "towering erection" in the film) gestures diachronically forward to Project Mayhem is that glycerine is gleaned from the soap mixture to make explosive nitroglycerine. And soap, "the yardstick of civilization," as Tyler refers to it in David Fincher's *Fight Club* film adaptation, is rendered into civilization's annihilation, hygiene into terror.

As for Joe's hallucination of the episode, as with the flowers-on-video trope, the cigarette burn points directly to filmic *re-mediation* of Joe's predicament: a "cigarette burn" is the name of the reel-switching signal that he dwells on at the beginning of the novel. Once again, all experience is being conducted through the byzantine circuitry of Discourse Network 2000, a monstrous apparatus in which everyone is implicated and, consequently, on whose operations there can be no hygienic perspective.

Finally, given the splicing operation that Tyler performs on Walt Disney films, the cartoon-faery tale motif undulating through the novel points to its irrecoverable *re-mediality*. In addition to Joe's figuration of his first fight with Tyler through the prism of cartoon combat, the novel is littered with references to precisely the kind of children's film on which they perform their "medial vivisections." For instance, Joe refers to his hallucinatory experience of airplane travel whereby his "Alice in Wonderland legs are all of a sudden miles long" (*FC* 28); Marla, for her part, refers to condoms as "the glass slippers of [their] generation" (66) and pretends to be a mermaid (99), obvious references to Walt Disney's *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*. Once again, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that everything taking place in this self-enclosed narrative-occupational universe is the product of a psychotic re-medial fantasy system. Any pretense that Joe may stand outside of this system, for example, by occupying the role of medial vivisector, by no means obviates the re-medial reality of his own "symbolic castration." Joe is the one being vivisected and subjected to the pornographic intrusion of everything that his occupational universe was "erected" to keep out. To make matters more unsettling, his baseline reality was always-already an unreal cartoon product of the Culture Industry.

Like *American Pastoral*'s Seymour Levov, Joe is rendered impotent against the onslaught, in the face of which the normative white male can no longer conjure the resources of cultural heroism. Thus, he is forced by the volatile spirit of the age to confront the systemic conditions that have made his violent form of life possible as his own web of complicity is brought into relief. Moreover, in another anticipation of *American Pastoral*, the would-be patriarchal Master is "rendered" into a bestial thanatopolitical subject. This time, he is figured not as a bull (the object of Foucault's "pastoral power") but as a hapless, anonymous "space

monkey." In 1997, the NASA space mission no longer exemplifies Fukayamian progress towards the end of history but, rather, untethered disorientation in the Culture Industry's mediasphere. Nothing about this predicament inspires optimism about Joe's fate, the destiny of the nation, or the trajectory of humanity.[59]

"I am not a man, I am dynamite."
- Friedrich Nietzsche

"People are not the heroes of history. The heroes of history are the rhythms and powers of the rising and falling of the world, in which people appear."
- Peter Sloterdijk

Chapter Five: *American Pastoral*: Twilight of the Idylls

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* represents the rise and fall of narrator Nathan Zuckerman's childhood hero Seymour "Swede" Levov. After Levov's death, Zuckerman discovers that the Swede, after leading an iconic young life as a high school sports legend, marine drill sergeant, and, finally, captain of industry, was forced to contend with a daughter who became a Weathermen-style terrorist, an "indigenous American berserk" (*Pastoral* 86) who destroyed a post office and reduced his pastoral fantasy world to oblivion. In order to make sense of the Swede's tragic trajectory, Nathan undertakes a thorough reimagining of his childhood hero's adult life in order to ascertain how it is that a man figured as the apogee of the post-World-War-II Jewish American dream, a paragon of peace, prosperity, and assimilation, could give birth to "a child who was neither Catholic nor Jew, who instead was first a stutterer, then a killer, then a Jain" (*Pastoral* 386).

In "The Critique of the Pastoral, Utopia, and the American Dream in *American Pastoral*," Andrew Gordon underscores the significance of "the pastoral mode"—originating in the

shepherd poetry of Theocritus and Virgil—to Roth's novel. Importantly, for Gordon, "Empson expands the [traditional] definition of pastoral to include . . . 'any work which opposes simple to complicated life, to the advantage of the former' . . . . In other words, any pastoral contains an element of utopian longing" (Gordon 34). A great deal of critical effort has been dedicated to articulating the deep reservoir of pastoral myths that Roth draws on, including canonical religious texts such as The Book of Genesis and *Paradise Lost*; great American novels that critically adapt the pastoral mode like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Great Gatsby*; and American philosophical tracts ranging from Adam Smith's myth of the garden of the world to Leo Marx's account of the pastoral landscape's resistance to industrial modernization (Kumamoto Stanley 5; Gordon 37). In order to understand the intricacies of its operations, however, Seymour "Swede" Levov's specific occupational nexus must, like Jack Gladney's in *White Noise*, be examined in terms of its manifold mediating functions.[60] Whether the Swede wishes to acknowledge it or not, the pastoral nexus in which he dwells is a media network that represents and channels the world for its inhabitants, who are, in turn, its "mediums." In Levov's words (as Zuckerman imagines them):

> The factory was a place I wanted to be from the time I was a boy. The ball field was a place I wanted to be from the time I started kindergarten. That this [Rimrock dwelling] is a place where I want to be I knew the moment I laid eyes on it . . . . We own a piece of America. (*American Pastoral* 315)

These vital nodes of Levov's American occupational universe—the ball field, his home in historical Old Rimrock, and the family's glove business—constitute a total media complex meant

to protect the Swede against the incursion of perceived threats, both material and semiotic. The operations of this elaborate fantasy edifice, whose "blind spots" come back to haunt Seymour ("See more") Levov and Nathan Zuckerman, have yet to be inspected in the critical literature with the attention required to tease out their medialogic.

5.1 Framing the Frame

The novel begins with two epigraphs that frame Zuckerman's narrative with mediating elements. Strangely, very few of the critics probe these epigraphs beyond the obvious associations. The first epigraph is taken from Johnny Mercer's song "Dream": "Dream when the day is thru,/ Dream and they might come true,/ Things are never as bad as they seem,/ So dream, dream, dream." The passage gestures towards, among other things, Zuckerman's phantasmagoric method of mediating the adult life of his "household Apollo" (*Pastoral* 4) with an admixture of scant known details and a rich narrative fantasy. Eventually, Zuckerman's explicit presence in the novel drifts away to the tune of "Dream" (89), played during his high school reunion when he discovers that Levov has died. Zuckerman next imaginatively inserts himself into the Swede's life "as [Levov would have] imagine[d] it" (89). At face value, Mercer's song proffers a soothing balm to the suffering ("things are not as bad as they seem"). However, "dream" can signify prompted aspiration (as in "dare to dream") and mediated permission for nocturnal fantasy (as in "Dream when the day is thru"). Furthermore, there is another layer of complexity to the epigraph in that, by referring to it as a "popular song of the 1940's," Roth alludes to the rendition of Johnny Mercer's song that would have been popular during Zuckerman's childhood: the version that is likely playing during his hallucinatory reverie was performed by a band called "The Pied

Pipers." This link becomes more relevant when we consider that the name of the family whose convenience store Merry blows up is "Hamlin." This Pied Piper-led "dream" then suggests an unthinking remediation in Zuckerman's reverential act of "lift[ing] onto stage the boy [the Jewish children in the community] were all going to follow into America, [their] point man in the next immersion" (89).

The other epigraph, "the rare occurrence of the expected," is a fragment from William Carlos Williams' poem "At Kenneth Burke's Place," wherein the earth is described as a tempestuous sphere that brandishes its own "private language," one that is inaccessible to the operations of "domesticity, the familial." The poem describes the chaotic world outside the hearth, a world that is "esoteric to our dullness," as an apple, a motif that figures prominently in the novel. The apple in Williams' poem is partly rotten but still vibrant, "smudged with/ a sooty life that clings, also,/ with the skin . . . still good/ even unusual compared with the usual./as if a taste long lost and regretted had in the end, finally, been brought to life again" (Williams 106). The apple, a metonym for the decaying pastoral habitus that Zuckerman imputes to the Swede and Eve's transgression, is withering on the vine of an untended tree. The residual life that clings to the skin will soon decay, like all the rest. And yet this rotting apple in what remains of the once lush bucolic space merits appreciation, perhaps more so than ever. An apostrophic voice (perhaps Burke's, perhaps Williams') from the wilderness, not altogether unlike the one that emerges in the last two lines of Rilke's "The Archaic Torso of Apollo," enjoins the reader to take a bite of the apple. The implications of this Edenic motif are manifold, and the epigraph is pertinent given that these ruminations are associated with Kenneth Burke, one of the great theorizers of identification, whose *Grammar of Motives* is "concerned with the basic forms of thought which, in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it,

are exemplified in the attributing of motives" (*Grammar of Motives* xv). Burke's *Grammar* is a theoretical instrument for revealing the underlying rhetorical motivation of a dramaturgical nexus, precisely the kind of task that Zuckerman undertakes in his remediation of the trauma that befell the deceased Swede within the seemingly bucolic microcosm that is nonetheless susceptible to violence and decay.

Another Burkean current that subtends the novel is the rhetorician's analysis of "trained incapacity," a phenomenon Burke conjoins with "occupational psychosis." "Trained incapacity," an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the twentieth century, according to Burke, refers to the maladjusted and even counter-productive effect that occupational training can have in a multivalent cultural universe of "marked instability" (*Permanence and Change* 32). Just as animals that sense that the ringing of a bell signals meal time can be misled by their Pavlovian training, Burke observes, when the experimenter instead uses that bell to line them up for slaughter, so too can individuals trained to engage with the world through a specialized occupational sphere of activity find themselves maladjusted to the vicissitudes of a diverse and rapidly metamorphosing world (10). In *American Pastoral*, the Swede and, by extension, Zuckerman are explicitly depicted as just such animals, incapacitated by their mediated American pastoral preoccupations and trained to regard themselves as benevolent shepherds. This implication of tragic dupery circulates through the text and attaches itself not only to Levov and Zuckerman but perhaps to everyone who occupies their universe, including the reader who might recognize how they are caught up "in the power of something demented" (*Pastoral* 256).

With the uncertain tone of the epigraphs, Roth does not articulate this nested "dream" unambiguously. The narrative that unfolds, like Burke's pentadic grammar, constantly takes into account that "insofar as men cannot themselves create the universe, there must remain something

essentially enigmatic about the problem of motives, and that this underlying enigma will manifest itself in inevitable ambiguities and inconsistencies" (*Grammar of Motives* xviii). In fact, the forensic-imaginary undertaking that Roth has Zuckerman conduct, like Gladney's own efforts to resolve ambiguity in *White Noise*, constantly frustrates the reader's efforts to conduct a reliable analysis of the causal nexus supposedly animating the diegetic universe of *American Pastoral.*

The most significant source of uncertainty is the narration itself, from which Zuckerman *qua* discrete narrator—along with the frame narrative that he inhabits—altogether disappears. He re-emerges only in ambiguous form through his representation of the Swede by way of what we might refer to as "free-direct discourse,"[61] and Seymour's representation of the Swede far more closely resembles ventriloquism than reported speech. Zuckerman's subjectivity continues to permeate the text, of course, as he inventively conjures the imagined character of Seymour Levov. The reader's only access to Levov's tale is mediated through Zuckerman, a fictional author, who may or may not be Roth's surrogate, and who has written an imaginary account of the fictitious Swede's life. The tale that emerges from this remediated circuit is thus a kind of virtual reality within which the labyrinthine problems of attribution, responsibility, interiority, and immunity are staged and scrutinized.

5.2 Fearful Semitry and All-American Occupations

The frame narrative of the novel begins, in the lead-up to Zuckerman's 45th high school reunion in 1995, with Zuckerman's nostalgic reflections about his childhood hero. Levov, as Zuckerman remembers him, "the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews" (*Pastoral* 4), received his nickname, "the Swede," as a consequence of his markedly Nordic, blond-haired,

blue-eyed appearance. Through the Swede's also markedly un-Jewish athletic prowess, the entire neighbourhood, for whom

> physical aggression, even camouflaged by athletic uniforms and official rules and intended to do no harm to Jews, was not a traditional source of pleasure, . . . entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they imagined Gentiles), . . . families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. Primarily, they could forget the war. (*Pastoral* 3-4)

In particular, according to Zuckerman, the Swede collectively embodied "the strength, the resolve, the emboldened valor that would prevail to return [the] high school's servicemen home unscathed from [the war]"(5). As a libidinal lightning rod for the hopes and dreams of a community preoccupied with the violent extirpation of European Jewry, the Swede's athletic triumphs, which, though isomorphic with violent battlefield triumph, are nonetheless civilized and peaceful, and constitute a spiritual centre of gravity for a beleaguered community.

In addition to his anomalous good looks and heroic athleticism, the young Swede manifests a "staid and stone-faced" (*Pastoral* 4) stoicism, an affectless surface bespeaking an apparent lack of lack that only heightened his allure amongst the community. His endeavours function as an escapist fantasy screen: "With the Swede indomitable on the playing field, the meaningless surface of life provided a bizarre, delusionary kind of sustenance, the happy release into a Swedian innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or their brothers or their husbands again" (*Pastoral* 4).

What Sandra Kumamoto Stanley refers to as Levov's impossible "dream of [the Swede as a convergence point of] *e pluribus unum*, the many becoming one, an assimilation that erases differences," has an intergenerational dimension that bespeaks a notion of "history as a mythic vehicle for teleological narrative, . . . a utopic Hegelian synthesis" (7):

> the anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past . . . out of each new generation's breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-American insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals. (*Pastoral* 85)

Zuckerman, writes Kumamoto Stanley, ". . . imagines post-World War II American identity as a grounded in a coherent, autonomous self; and he believes that achieving such an ideal American identity demands the eradication of a Jewish past—or any ethnic past—that suggests difference" (7). The contradiction at the heart of Zuckerman's Swede is that he ". . . embraces the symbols of an American universalism without fully realizing that he is in fact embracing not a universal but a particular form of gentile identity" (Kumamoto Stanley 7). In Žižekian terms, as an apogee of the neighbourhood's assimilationist fantasies, the effortless all-American sports hero Swede allows the community to "interpassively" (*Plague* 116) participate in an American dream from which their marked Jewishness still, to a certain extent, excludes them. As such, he occupies a problematic position: the paradoxical result of Levov's "perfection," the liquidation of any semblance of his racialized self, is a mere patina of neutral generic selfhood that resonates as

nothing but semblance and surface. Once the reader has become attuned to the ambiguities that saturate the novel, the Swede's apparent "unconscious oneness with America" betokens not merely an effortlessly authentic Americanness, one that precludes "irony" and "resentment," but also, a pure unconsciousness, in the Lacanian sense, an absolute identification with the generic narrative structures that captivate the unassimilated Jewish-American imaginary. One of the questions haunting Zuckerman's account is the extent to which this minimal ironic distance, of the sort engendered by lack and desire, is a necessary component of the experience of selfhood and autonomy.

Here, it is necessary to pay careful attention to Zuckerman's language, which is everywhere suffused with ambiguity. Zuckerman refers to the Swede as "[the neighbourhood's] point man into the next immersion" (*Pastoral* 89). While most critics who take note of the phrase "point man," underscore its sporting valence (after all, the young Swede is a sports hero), the term is, in fact, rich with import. In addition to denoting "a player who (habitually) plays in a (particular) attacking position during offensive maneuvers," "point man" can signify a "soldier positioned at the head of a patrol" or "a person who rides at the head of a herd of cattle" ("Point Man"). As their "point man" on the front lines of "the next immersion" he is figured as both a sovereign on the vanguard (literally, a pastor minding his flock or shepherd taking care of his herd) and something akin to Agamben's *homo sacer*, one who is inordinately exposed to danger by virtue of his position outside of the fold but still within the ambit of "pastoral power," a modality of power that, Foucault and Sloterdijk remind us, lays the groundwork for the labyrinthine "capillary action" of biopolitical relations that surpass the mastery of any sovereign agency.[62]

A fascinated Zuckerman speculates about the Swede's lack of emotive expressiveness, wondering whether it bespeaks the absence of "human-all-too-human" desire and inner struggle (the mythical plateau of the Girardian "hero's *askesis*"[63]) or is an illusory persona, the "outward manifestation of an arduous struggle to keep in check the narcissism that an entire community was ladling with love" (*Pastoral* 4). Unable to resolve the ambiguities, Zuckerman concludes:

> Either there was a whole side to his personality that he was suppressing or that was as yet asleep or, more likely, there wasn't. His aloofness, his seeming passivity as the desired object of all this asexual lovemaking, made him appear, if not divine, a distinguished cut above the more primordial humanity of just about everybody else at the school. He was fettered to history, an instrument of history, esteemed with a passion that might never have been if he'd broken the Weequahic basketball record—by scoring twenty-seven points against Barringer—on a day other than the sad, sad day in 1943 when fifty-eight Flying Fortresses were shot down by Luftwaffe fighter planes . . . (*Pastoral* 5-6)

Casting the high school sports hero Swede as a superhero who is nonetheless a "fettered . . . instrument of history," Zuckerman situates him in an intrinsically contradictory position. By virtue of his athletic prowess, the young Swede is depicted as numinously superhuman in stature and agency but also, paradoxically, a merely "passive" medium of history. His indentured mediality is, therefore, manifold. Synchronically, the young Swede is a blank screen for the mythopoetic projections of a community's desire to escape from literal and affective abjection (to the imperial Nazis and hostile perceived American WASP mores, respectively). Diachronically speaking, he is depicted as a servant of history and the movement of the Geist, whose currents he

seemed to conduct at the end of the war. One of many questions that Zuckerman's imaginative reconstruction is meant to resolve is how a man who was charged with the task of being post-racial modernity's bellwether could have been reduced to the status of its impotent "hostage" (Brauner 27).

Zuckerman's account of the Swede is heavily mediated through a children's story that he first discovered on Levov's bookshelf, *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, a story that Zuckerman notes could just as easily have been called "*The Lamb from Tomkinsville*" (*Pastoral* 8). The story is about the rise and fall of a self-effacing young pitcher, a meek, scrawny kid whose "gloved hand looks like a paw" (*Pastoral* 7), who is "shepherd[ed]" (*Pastoral* 8) to greatness, only to suffer a succession of accidental injuries that ultimately cripple him. This narrative of a lamb shepherded to slaughter, which conjures both the ugly underbelly of the pastoral mode (a counter-pastoral fate with which both Zuckerman and the older Swede will be made intimately familiar) and the story of Christ "the Lamb of God," is the first of several metonymic narrative repackagings that Zuckerman refers to. Anticipating the tragedy that will befall Levov, he refers to *The Kid from Tomkinsville* as "the boys' Book of Job" (*Pastoral* 9) and, in short order, sets about linking the Swede's life to a succession of tragic victims.

Attempting to "imbue Swede Levov with something like the tendentious meaning Tolstoy assigned to Ivan Ilych" (30), Zuckerman recalls that Ilych's life, like those of the Kid and Job, "*had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible*" (31; Roth's italics). But unlike Ivan Ilych, the Swede presents a seeming false front of equanimity that confounds Levov, who concludes that the tragedy of Levov's life, and the puzzles it presents to the observer, strikes a more contemporary, more American chord than anything Tolstoy wrote: "in Old Rimrock, New

Jersey, in 1995, when the Ivan Ilyches come trooping back to lunch at the clubhouse after their morning round of gold and start to crow, 'It doesn't get any better than this,' they may be a lot closer to the truth than Leo Tolstoy ever was" (31). Then, distinguishing the Swede's life from the aforementioned myths, Zuckerman, looks to another all-American mythopoetic hero:

> Whatever Happened to Swede Levov. Surely not what befell the Kid from Tomkinsville. Even as boys we must have known that it couldn't have been as easy for him as it looked, that a part of it was a mystique, but could have imagined that his life would come apart in this horrible way? A sliver off the comet of the American chaos had come loose and spun all the way out to Old Rimrock and him. His great looks, his larger-than-lifeness, his glory, our sense of his having been exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role — that all these manly properties had precipitated a political murder made me think of the compelling story not of John R. Tunis' sacrificial Tomkinsville Kid but of . . . John F. Kennedy, only a decade the Swede's senior and another privileged son of fortune, another man of glamour exuding American meaning, assassinated while still in his mid-forties just five years before the Swede's daughter violently protested the Kennedy-Johnson war and blew up her father's life. I thought, But of course. He is our Kennedy. (*Pastoral* 83)

We should pay close attention to the coordinates of this metonymic slippage. Unlike the Lamb of God, Job, and the Kid, Kennedy is a recent American historical character, a contemporary "larger-than-life" shepherd of the American flock whose prominent status renders him vulnerable and ultimately results in his assassination. The avatar of Kennedy, whose name and association

with the Swede resurfaces as a leitmotiv throughout the novel, assumes the status of a tropological echo chamber of the Swede's universe. The richly-variegated web of associations that emerges out of this conjuncture exudes a mainspring of significance comprising countless inflections of the Swede's story. To unfold just a few of the implications, for Zuckerman, the Swede was the Arthurian centre of gravity of a Jewish-American "Camelot," a term often used to refer back nostalgically to the Kennedy era. The Irish-Catholic Kennedy, like the Swede and his Irish-Catholic wife, represents the fleeting possibility of Jewish and Catholic assimilation in a WASP milieu (Macarthur 15). But Kennedy's televised assassination (an event that figures prominently in the imaginations of Philip Roth and Don DeLillo[64]) marks an abrupt temporal rupture that conveys the novel's modern understanding of history (*Pastoral* 61. According to Roth,

> [Kennedy's assassination] was an event so stunning that our historical receptors were activated. The stuff that's happened in the last 40 years—the Vietnam war, the social revolution of the 60s, the Republican backlash of the 80s and 90s—have been so powerfully determining that men and women of intelligence and literary sensibility feel that the strongest thing in their lives is what has happened to us collectively: the new freedoms, the testing of the old conventions, the prosperity. That's what I was writing about in the trilogy that followed Sabbath—*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*: people prepare for life in a certain way and have certain expectations of the difficulties that come with those lives, then they get blindsided by the present moment; history comes in at them in ways for which there is no preparation. 'History is a very sudden thing,' is how I put it. I'm talking about the historical fire at the centre and how the smoke from

that fire reaches into your house. (qtd. in Alvarez 39-40)

That "[h]istory is a very sudden thing," a refrain recapitulated throughout the novel and embodied by his daughter Merry, is an insight at acute odds with the Swede's timeless pastoral worldview, but one that he, Zuckerman, and the reader are nonetheless compelled to confront when the smoke from the fire starts to penetrate the pastoral dwelling.

Zuckerman recalls that the last time he encountered the now-deceased Swede "in the flesh," not long before the reunion, the former icon seemed eerily emptied of autonomous subjectivity:

> I was impressed, as the meal wore on, by how assured he seemed of everything commonplace he said, and how everything he said was suffused by his good nature. I kept waiting for him to lay bare something more than this pointed unobjectionableness, but all that rose to the surface was more surface. What he has instead of a being, I thought, is blandness — the guy's radiant with it. He has devised for himself an incognito, and the incognito has become him. Several times during the meal I didn't think I was going to make it, didn't think I'd get to dessert if he was going to keep praising his family and praising his family . . . until I began to wonder if it wasn't that he was incognito but that he was mad. Something was on top of him that had called a halt to him. Something had turned him into a human platitude. Something had warned him: You must not run counter to anything. (*Pastoral* 22)

As an adult, having been enveloped by his incognito persona and reduced to a state of mere

"unobjectionableness," the Swede's platitudinous expression of pure surface (the screen onto which the whole community once projected its aspirational fantasies) now resonates as empty and pathological. Zuckerman intuits that this blank vestige of Levov must be "mad." On discovering, after Levov's death, that his daughter Merry had become a terrorist and blown up a post office, murdering several innocents in the process, he endeavours to, once and for all, get to the bottom—through imaginative reconstruction—of the mystery that is the Swede's internal life by way of ascertaining the originary "transgression" (*Pastoral* 89, 360) that precipitated this tragedy.

The unfolding of the phantasmagoric flashback turns primarily on the twofold question of the mystery of how Merry became the "counterpastoral" aberration that she did and what the Swede's lifeworld, his "internal" experience of the world around him, could look like. The two questions ultimately converge on one answer: Merry's revolt must have been an "indigenous" product of the American pastoral form of life that her father wholeheartedly embodies:

> the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens the particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk. (*Pastoral* 86)

In order to understand how a violent "berserk" could be be engendered by an elaborate sphere of activity designed to insulate the Levov family from violent discord, it will be necessary to analyze the primary nodes of the adult Swede's occupational assemblage, his home and his

career, which critic Andrew Gordon refers to as “the nexus of [Levov's] pastoral dream” (Gordon 40). Insofar as the Levov nexus constitutes a total media system, an existential castle in which Levov ensconces himself and his family, it reduces the complexity of the outside world by mediating it through the selectively historical “transcendent utopic myth” (Kumamoto Stanley 5) of the pastoral, a mythos that he treats as a “self-contained artifact” (5).

5.3 Iron Fist, Latex Glove

Gloves, skins, and the glove business pervade the Levov family's existential castle as both material entities and tropes. As Elizabeth Powers observes, the Swede's Newark Maid Glove Factory “stands in for the pastoral economy, one based on transmission of generational skills” (Powers 136). The Swede explains to Rita Cohen that “Most of the glove businesses have been family businesses. From father to son. Very traditional business. A product is a product to most manufacturers. The guy who makes them doesn't know anything about them. The glove business isn't like that. This business has a long, long history” (*Pastoral* 130). As such, it is a primarily patrilineal, pre-Fordist mercantile operation, historically involving the intergenerational stability required to apprentice young sons. And up until Merry's irruption onto the scene, this was precisely how it operated in the Levov family. Even the name “Newark Maid” evokes not merely the atavistic pastoral reality that the Levov family enterprise has patched into but also the corresponding patriarchal kinship relations, whereby women were entirely subordinate to the “law of the father” (Parrish 96; Kumamoto Stanley 3).

While explaining the inner workings of the glove factory to Rita, the Swede is overcome with wistful ruminations about the trajectory of the Levov family project, which Merry has

violently opted out of. Rita's resemblance to Merry (with whom she may or may not be surreptitiously in cahoots) evokes the past "when the family endured by a truth in no way grounded in abetting destruction but rather eluding and outlasting destruction, overcoming its mysterious inroads by creating a utopia of rational existence" (*Pastoral* 122-3). Until Merry came along and blew it to kingdom come, the family's positivist intergenerational project had seemed consubstantial with the liberal interpretation of the Hegelian *telos* of the American project itself. For the Swede, the Levov family once had the trappings of an

> immigrant rocket, the upward, unbroken immigrant trajectory from slave-driven great-grandfather to self-driven grandfather to self-confident, accomplished, independent father to the highest high flier of them all, the fourth generation child for whom America was to be heaven itself. (122)

This intergenerational space flight never makes it to "a utopia of rational existence" not merely because Merry revolts against this rational order but because, at a deeper epochal level, such a Kennedy-era "glove heaven" is no longer realizable within the coordinates of Johnson-Nixon era America.[65] Lou Levov's vision of the pastoral "particularly the encapsulated refuge it offers its inhabitants, is a fragile form of existence [as evinced by] the disruptions produced by the 1967 race riots in Newark—which destroy the city's and the factory's viability—but more so the Swede's life" (Powers 136). After the race riots, Newark, which had once been "the city where they manufactured everything, a veritable workshop of the world, [degenerated into] the car-theft capital of the world" (*Pastoral* 24),[66] a place where "black-and-white does not mean a soda anymore on Bergen Street. It means the worst kind of hatred in the world" (25). And, after the

deluge, “black-and-white” certainly no longer describes the prevailing sense of morality in a world where “the grotesque is supplanting everything” (348).

Lou, whom the Swede often channels in his thinking about the family business, especially when he is explaining it to Rita, who, in turn, reminds him of Merry and the family's prelapsarian bliss, apprehends history only within the context of the glove business; public history is thereby subsumed into his private capitalist narrative, wherein, observes Kumamoto Stanley, “World War II saved the democratic world along with the glove business, and the ‘glove man got rich’ . . . . The election of President Kennedy, which installed Jackie Kennedy with her pillbox hat and decorous gloves as a national fashion leader, reinvigorated the industry” (9). But “. . . Jackie's gloved hands [eventually] become anachronistic, signaling the loosening of society's own grasp on a coherent socioeconomic metanarrative” (9). Even if the race riots, to which, along with taxes and corruption, Lou attributes the decline of the local glove industry had never broken out, “The assassination of John F. Kennedy and the arrival of the miniskirt . . . that was the death knell for the ladies' dress glove” (*Pastoral* 349). The ladies' dress glove simply fell out of style in an era of permissive mores when women and men were increasingly exposing skin rather than covering it up. Accordingly, this epochal rupture does not bode any better for the neighbourhood Kennedy, who is also violently usurped by the spirit of the age.

For the Swede, like his father, the business, and the glove trope in particular, balloons in implication and is rendered synecdochal, into a material-semiotic theory of everything. In one *reductio ad absurdum*, the Swede even renders the glove into a locus of the greatness of human civilization. Feeling himself being ventriloquized by his father, he goes so far as to tell Rita Cohen,

> Monkeys, gorillas, they have brains and we have a brain, but they don’t have this

> thing, thumb. They can't move it opposite the way we do. The inner digit on the hand of man, that might be the distinguishing physical feature between ourselves and the rest of the animals. And the glove protects that inner digit. That ladies' glove, the welder's glove, the rubber glove, the baseball glove, et cetera. This is the root of humanity, this opposable thumb. It enables us to make tools and build cities and everything else. More than the brain. Maybe some other animals have bigger brains in proportion to their bodies . . . . But the hand itself is an intricate thing . . . . There is no other part of a human being that is clothed that is such a complex moving structure . . . . (*Pastoral* 131)

The Swede's *apprehension* of the human cultural universe through the glove (which is a metonym for, among other things, *apprehension* itself), however, should immediately evoke Zuckerman's description of the Kid's gloved hand, which "looks like a paw" (7), one of many indications that the Swede is not the paragon of human civilization that the young Zuckerman would make him out to be. As such, "the complex moving structure" of the glove's occupational nexus harbours ironic resonances that the Swede is not able to access and the "bare life" of his unclothed hand is not of the sort the Swede imagines.

It is not merely history and human civilization that are rendered through the glove trope. The Swede describes his intransigent father as "rough-hewn" (11) and "thick-skinned," while Zuckerman characterizes the Swede's life is one "in the American grain" (31); "there was nothing coarse grained about him" (37). This smooth, seamless American grain, however, belongs to the bygone era of "a coherent socioeconomic metanarrative," "guarantee[ing] the making of a life that would fit to perfection everyone he loved" (421). Seizing on "thin skin" as a metonym not

for immunitary protection and comfort, but of superficiality and misunderstanding of the cultural vibrations around him, Rita tells the Swede “all you really fucking care about is skin. Ectoderm. Surface. But what's underneath, you don't have a clue" (137). Rita's accusation invokes Zuckerman's assessment that “all that rose to the surface was more surface” but it also reverberates through Jerry's indictment of the Swede's worldview, *modus vivendi*, and approach to parenting:

> You think you know what a man is? You have no idea what a man is. You think you know what a daughter is? You have no idea what a daughter is. You think you know what this country is? You have no idea what this country is. You have a false image of everything. All you know is what a fucking glove is. This country is frightening . . . . This isn't Old Rimrock, old buddy – she's out there . . . in the USA. She enters that world, that loopy world out there, with what's going on out there – what do you expect? A kid from Rimrock, NJ, of course she didn't know how to behave out there, of course the shit hits the fan . . . . You prepare her for life milking the cows? For what kind of life? Unnatural, all artificial, all of it. Those assumptions you live with. You're still in your old man's dream-world, Seymour, still up there with Lou Levov in glove heaven. A household tyrannized by gloves, bludgeoned by gloves, the only thing in life – ladies' gloves! Does he still tell the one about the woman who sells the gloves washing her hands in a sink between each color? Oh where oh where is that outmoded America, that decorous America where a woman had twenty-five pairs of gloves? Your kid blows your norms to kingdom come, Seymour, and you still think you know what life is?

(*Pastoral* 276-7)

Jerry views his brother's pastoral milieu as an "outmoded" hothouse that has ill-prepared both the Swede and Merry for the violent vicissitudes of the world. But it is also a false front, a smooth second skin to avoid conflict and occlude himself from plain view: "You are unrevealed," Jerry tells the Swede. "That is why your own daughter decided to blow you away. You are never straight about anything and she hated you for it. You keep yourself a secret" *(*276). Far from self-identical comfort in his own skin, Levov's persona, as interpreted by Jerry, buffers the adult Swede from the discomfort of radical self-exposure but, in so doing, passes the family *Unbehagen* along to his daughter, who has taken it upon herself to annihilate its foundations. In the wake of Merry's terrorism and abjection, "the old system that made order doesn't work anymore" (*Pastoral* 422).

5.4 Rock of Castration

As with Gladney's home in *White Noise*, the Swede's residential "castle," his home in Old Rimrock, New Jersey constitutes a primary locus of his occupational nexus. Gordon makes a compelling case that Zuckerman extrapolates from the young Swede's seeming "at-homeness" on the playing field, his comfort in his own shoes, that the high school sports hero is, in fact, "at home" in America in a way that most of the Jewish community could never aspire to (Gordon 51). The young Swede "lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin" (*Pastoral* 213), and it is precisely this sense of security within the contours of WASP America that leads "staid, stone-faced" Levov to seek out the rural Rimrock abode for his family dwelling. The Swede, writes Gordon, ". . . seeks permanence in America. The eighteenth-century stone home not only

imparts a feeling of security to the Swede and his young family, but also affords them a purchase on an authentic Americanness. The house is the emblem of the Swede's American dream realized" (Gordon 55). In this capacity, the historic house in the historic rural municipality ". . . provides his family with a portal into the very bedrock of white America . . . . The Old Rimrock house is the culmination of the Swede's fantasies of Americanness" (55), a frontier experience whereby he is a kind of pioneer:

> Next to marrying Dawn Dwyer, buying that house and the hundred acres and moving to Old Rimrock was the most daring thing he had ever done. What was Mars to his father was America to him – he was settling Revolutionary New Jersey as if for the first time. Out in Old Rimrock, all of America lay at their door . . . . Jewish resentment, Irish resentment – the hell with it . . . it had been courageous of them to head out to Old Rimrock. (*Pastoral* 310)

This ostensibly post-political Rimrock is a place where, as the Swede sees it, people of every stripe "can live in harmony, all sorts of people side by side no matter what their origins" (*Pastoral* 311). The Swede views Old Rimrock as simultaneously ancient, in its historical connection to the inception of the American project, and new, an end-of-history rational utopia where trailblazing liberal pioneers can finally luxuriate in unmediated post-racial Americanness.

But Lou Levov voices another take on Old Rimrock, one that renders it significantly more hostile and alien than the Swede's fantasy system would allow. "In fact, the Swede never truly belongs in 'rock-ribbed Republican New Jersey'" (Gordon 38), where, Lou remembers, the Ku Klux Klan thrived in the 1920's and, in the 1930's, the local WASPS despised FDR because he was an ally to the Jews, Italians, and Irish (*Pastoral* 309). And, though Lou insists the

seething xenophobia and antisemitism are still present in Rimrock, “where the haters live” (309), the Swede “like some frontiersman of old, would not be turned back” (310).

As with Zuckerman's association of the baseball-playing young Swede with *The Kid from Tomkinville*, the Swede's decision to dwell in Old Rimrock is mediated through a particular variation of the story of Johnny Appleseed:

> Wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian—nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American . . . . And every time he walked into Old Rimrock village . . . he pulled on his boots and walked the five hilly miles into the village and the five hilly miles back, early in the morning . . . just to get the Saturday paper, and he could not help himself—he thought, “Johnny Appleseed!” The pleasure of it . . . . He didn't care if he played ball ever again—he just wanted to step out and stride. It seemed somehow that the ballplaying had cleared the way to allow him to do this, to stride in an hour down to the village, pick up the Lackawanna edition of the Newark News at the general store with the single Sunoco pump out front . . . . It was the only store down there in the fifties and hadn't changed since the Hamlin son took it over from his father after World War I . . . . (*Pastoral* 316-7)

Commenting on Levov's powerful identification with the Johnny Appleseed narrative, Derek Parker Royal writes, “What better myth for the Swede's idealized America than the story of a man who more or less 'planted' and nurtured the pastoral onto the national stage” (Royal 123). Taking this insight a step further, Timothy Parrish highlights the specific use the Swede makes of this mythopoetic temporal narrative logic: “As Johnny Appleseed, the Swede can imagine

himself as the progenitor of the America he now inhabits: ancestor and inheritor all at once" (Parrish 136). But the Swede's particularly tendentious version of Johnny Appleseed as a raceless, classless, zero-level secular American, or rather, one whose only religion is prelapsarian America, conveniently disavows and modifies some of the details of the historical John "Appleseed" Chapman's life. Chapman, the orchard pioneer, who is credited with spreading apple trees to the US, was not, in fact, a secular individual. He was a devout "Swede" of sorts – a Swedenborgian missionary, suggesting the delusional dimension of the Swede's identification with the mythical-historical figure, whose fantasmatic avatar represents the possibility of forging an umbilical cord to the nation's history once the Swede has cast off the nets of race, ethnicity, and class. Furthermore, the historical Appleseed was anything but an Apollo. For the apple trees that the missionary Chapman planted did not produce edible apples. They were used, instead, for cider: "Really, what Johnny Appleseed was doing and the reason he was welcome in every cabin in Ohio and Indiana was he was bringing the gift of alcohol to the frontier. He was our American Dionysus" (Pollan 35). As with Gladney's mediatic accoutrements in *White Noise*, Levov's fantasmatic mediation of his life is clearly a double-edged sword. The remedial strategy meant to buffer him against the incursion of "plague America" in fact *re-mediates* the plague within the confines of his abode, unleashing a Dionysian contagion within his sanitized Apollonian dwelling.[67]

5.5 Habitat for Inhumanity: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Property

As Glaser observes, "*American Pastoral* focuses on the paradoxical nature of the home as a space of containment and safety, as well as an arena for secrets and danger" (Glaser 49). According to Zuckerman's imagined account, the naive 16-year-old Swede first encounters his

citadel-like stone house in Old Rimrock out of the window of a bus while on a baseball trip:

> The stone house was not only engagingly ingenious-looking to the eyes—all that irregularity regularized, a jigsaw puzzle fitted patiently together into this square, solid thing to make a beautiful shelter—but it looked indestructible, an impregnable house that could never burn to the ground and that had probably been standing there since the country began. Primitive stones, rudimentary stones of the sort that you would see scattered about among the tress if you took a walk along the paths in Weequahic Park, and out there they were a house. (190)

Upon seeing a young girl swinging on a rope swing in front of the old stone house, the Swede becomes preoccupied with the house and bucolic form of life that it could afford him, deciding immediately that he will inhabit this hypostasized ideal by selecting a wife with whom he, too, can raise a daughter in such a thoroughly American environment. As with the other nodes of the Swede's pastoral nexus, however, this idealized pastoral home is riddled with contradictions. Royal observes that "Roth embeds . . . conflict in the guise of the family's stone house in Old Rimrock . . . . One does not have to read very far here to see the grand promise of American being visualized. The jig-saw, the irregular stones, the construction of the many parts into a seemingly indestructible whole all suggest varying aspects of the American dream and the melting pot philosophy" (Royal 8). The world of *American Pastoral*, however, does not seem to hold out much hope for ". . . a grand mosaic where each piece bears its distinct characteristics

and flavors" (8). The nation represented in the novel is ". . . the America of the Mayflower and of the Pilgrims, and surrounded by references to Johnny Appleseed and the likes of [Orcutt], . . . who can proudly trace his ancestry back before the Revolutionary War" (8). Royal concludes, "If the Jewish Swede and his Catholic-raised wife want to fit into this image, to melt in and become a part of this idealized jigsaw, they must do so on someone else's terms" (Royal 8).

Whereas Orcutt, whose pioneer family has lived in Old Rimrock since the nation's founding and whose old pilgrim name is cognate with "orchard," presumably has unmediated access to this pastoral ideal, is a veritable "steward" (*Pastoral* 358) of the land, Seymour and Dawn can only do so by way of deracinated fantasy constructs and prosthetic literary devices. Picking up this thread, Kumamoto Stanley draws on Max Weber's suggestion that "one of the culminating signs of American capitalistic success is in the acquisition of an ideal home," and suggests that the Swede believes his "Arcady Hill Road" house in Old Rimrock manifests that ideal. Problematically, however, in the US, this European pastoral ideal, deriving from Virgil's bucolic visions of an unchanging Arcadia, ". . . has been transmuted by the capitalistic impetus" (Kumamoto Stanley 9). The American pastoral, "shaped by Thomas Jefferson's agrarian vision and the principles of self-reliance, is rooted in one fundamental concept: the ownership of property" (9). The Swede, claims Kumamoto Stanley, envisions the American pastoral as an embodiment of a spiritual ideal, ". . . a nostalgic yearning for a rural origin where one can recover an Edenic oneness. Such a vision of wholeness, in the end, proves illusory" (Kumamoto Stanley 9).

From early on, the Swede's old stone Rimrock house, as a locus of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, is figured as anything but "indestructible" and "impregnable"; it is, rather, a

fallible pastoral immunitary bulwark against contagion, a "jigsaw puzzle" simulacrum of the pastoral that can be dismantled as readily as it was assembled. After learning, in broad brush strokes, about "the shocks that befell" the Swede and "the poison that . . . caused this poor guy to be placed outside his life" (74), Zuckerman endeavours to imagine

> the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens the particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral – into the indigenous American berserk. (86)

American Pastoral is peppered with references to "the plague America" in the form of illness, contagion, contamination, and unruliness, attributes that are frequently associated with Jewishness and femininity, while the pastoral occupations are associated with a robust masculinity cultivated into a "bulwark of duty" (*Pastoral* 79) against the external forces of annihilation. Ironically, it is the Swede and Zuckerman who suffer from aggressive prostate cancer, a crippling disease that renders them both impotent and incontinent, thereby undermining their performance of normative masculinity and underscoring their fragile mortality (Varvogli 111).

The elder Levovs' pastoral figurations of "community" are constantly bound up with "immunity" throughout the novel. When approached to join a local synagogue, Levov, "a man to whom practicing Judaism means nothing," is "irritated" (314):

> I go into those synagogues and it's all foreign to me. It always has been. When I had to go to Hebrew school as a kid, all the time I was in that room I couldn't wait to get out on the ball field. I used to think, 'If I sit in this room any longer, I'm going to get sick.' There was something unhealthy about those places. (314-5)

In “Something So Visceral In With the Rhetorical,” Monika Hogan explicates the Swede's immunitary strategy as a product of, in Anne Cheng’s terms, a “racial hypochondria,” a phobic equation of the racialized body with “illness, death, and the limits of assimilation” (Hogan 6). The Swede’s sterilization regime is rendered ineffectual by its “indigenous” progeny, his daughter Merry and her uncanny doppelganger Rita Cohen. Hogan writes, “Zuckerman's story of the Swede blends the young boy's vision of the "all American" god with the old man's knowledge of the body's inevitable betrayal in order to explore the embodied and historical predicament of being born into a particular clan or ‘identity’” (Hogan 7). Therefore, Zuckerman's “hypochondriacal” perspective “. . . creates a Swede whose vision of himself and the world tends towards pure fantasy, and which is corrected by the traumatic intrusion of "reality." Stuttering, overweight and eventually murderous, Merry brings the "stench" and disease of the body into the Swede's ‘American Pastoral’” (Hogan 7).

Elaborating on the bulwark function of the pastoral form of life, Zuckerman characterizes it as a means of containing the violent chaos that imperils those who are not fortunate enough to be buffered from the world's volatility:

> you had only to carry out your duties strenuously and unflaggingly like a Levov and orderliness became a natural condition . . . the fluctuations predictable, the combat containable, the surprises satisfying, the continuous motion an undulation

> carrying you along with the utmost faith that tidal waves occur only off the coast of countries thousands of miles away. (*Pastoral* 413)

Like Jack Gladney's own hypochondriacal occupational echosystem, Levov's hypermediated belief system about the proximity of disasters is organized around the premise that his form of life is insulated from their impact. His pastoral universe is, in architectural terms, engineered to be seismic resistant. Contextualizing the Swede's life in terms of the broader social currents from which he would like to protect himself, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley frames the Swede's pastoral strategy in terms of the trope of military "containment": "When George Kennan coined the term *containment* in his seminal 1947 Foreign Policy article, he espoused a global policy of containing the Soviet Union, a policy that came to dominate US foreign affairs for the next 40 years. In his essay, Kennan describes the Soviet Union as an infectious body that the US must keep at bay" (Kumamoto Stanley 13). In the following years the word "containment" "underwent a number of narrative interpretations, to the extent that it often generated contradictory strategies, becoming a "free-floating signifier" . . . . The desire to contain communism took many forms, including the Vietnam War" (13). Applying this genealogical understanding of the concept to the Swede's occupational universe, Kumamoto Stanley observes, "Unable to keep the war 'thousands and thousands of miles away,' the Swede finds that the combat, erupting in his business, in his home, is not containable" (Kumamoto Stanley 13).

Like Jack Gladney, the Swede—under the spell of, among other currents, televisual mediation—believes that his immunitary dwelling staves off the forces of annihilation far outside of its perimeter. And, apropos of Gladney, this proves to be a far more problematic aspiration

than he realizes. Though Jerry characterizes Merry's act of terrorism as "[bringing] the war home" (*Pastoral* 68), the Vietnam War—America's first televised war—has already long since infiltrated the Levov home. In fact, one of many primal scenes of Merry's disenchantment that Zuckerman imagines occurs when she witnesses a protesting Vietnamese monk lighting himself on fire on national television:

> out of nowhere and into their home, the nimbus of flames, the upright monk, and the sudden liquefaction before he keels over; into their home all those other monks . . . into their home on Arcady Hill Road the charred and blackened corpse on its back in that empty street. (*Pastoral* 153-4)

In "America's Haunted House," Jennifer Glaser trenchantly seizes upon this repetition of "into their home," which highlights Levov's commitment to ". . . the sanctity of the private sphere of the family as a bulwark against the vicissitudes of world events. This dichotomy between the purported safety of home and the danger of the outside world threatening to permeate the boundaries of the domestic recurs throughout *American Pastoral*" (Glaser 50-1).

According to Glaser, this anaphora, then, is symptomatic of what we might refer to as the Swede's intense "investment" in his Arcadian home's immunitary operations, an attitude that bespeaks the house's *Unheimlich,* or "uncanny," quality. Looking to Freud's etymological exploration of the *Heimlich-Unheimlich* couple in *The Uncanny*, Glaser explores its implications for the Swede's "haunted house." For Freud, the experience of the Moebius-band-like relationship between the terms *Heimlich-Unheimlich* is best understood through their association with the home (*Heim*). The *Heimlich* is "familiar, tame, intimate, arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within four walls of his house . . . . [The] uncanny is in reality

nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar . . . which has become alienated from [the mind] only through the process of repression" (Freud, cited by Glaser 46-7). The anxiety-inducing psycho-tropic experience of the uncanny is that of the emergence of the unsettlingly alien—which has become so by virtue of the repression to which it has been submitted—within the zone of the intimate and familiar. In the case of the disruption of the Levov's domestic homeostasis, much of the *Unheimlich* effect condenses around Merry, the bone in the throat of the Swede's pastoral nexus, who serves as a conduit to the violent turmoil from which the Swede would prefer to insulate himself. Whether the Swede acknowledges it or not, theirs was always-already a house "penetrated by world-historical events" (Glaser 50) such as those televisual images of the self-immolating Vietnamese monk that so traumatize Merry. And it is within the confines of the Swede's Old Rimrock dwelling that Merry surreptitiously reads the work of Karl Marx and Angela Davis, whose work she later supplements with Marcuse, Malcolm X, and Fanon. It is in the library where she discovers Jainism and converts. The Swede notes that she is always being ventriloquized by others, others who are responsible for her malfeasances. "The image of the terrorist seeking refuge in a library," writes Varvogli, "highlights the novel's emphasis on the power of discourse" (Varvogli 111). To be more specific, it speaks to the (tele)mobility and persuasive power of antithetical discourses, whose incursion on his pastoral dwelling the Swede would like to stave off by projecting them onto a hostile, alien "outside."[68] *Pace Mao II*'s Bill Grey, here it is the printed word, and, more generally, the mediasphere, that makes terroristic "raids on human consciousness" (*Mao II* 41). What's more, Glaser adds, "it is from the 'safety' of her own home . . . in Old Rimrock that Merry plans and commits her gravest crime – a bubbling up of the *Unheimlich* into the *Heimlich*" (Glaser 51); or, as Zuckerman puts it, "the return of the repressed that haunts all of the Levovs" (*Pastoral* 386). At the end of the

novel, as the Levov's uncontainable *Unheimlich* bubbles up within the Swede's quaint abode, the same anaphoric logic emerges as he becomes untethered from his two-dimensional pastoral fantasies: “He had made this fantasy and Merry had unmade it for him. It was not the specific war that she'd had in mind, but it was a war, nonetheless, that she brought home to America – home into her very own house” (*Pastoral* 418).

The *re-medial* logic of the Levov dwelling, the conversion of the Swede's pastoral panacea in “tranquil, untrafficked Rimrock” into uncanny violence radiates through every page of the novel. Most narrative description and every utterance contains polysemic connotations that reverberate with other such descriptions and utterances throughout the media complex of the novel. Jerry says "She's post-Catholic, he's post-Jewish, together they're going to go out there to Old Rimrock to raise little post-toasties." The “post” here refers to the “cultural void” (Bruhwiler 106), supposedly divested of ethnic conflicts, in which Merry has been brought up, but, as Parker Royal astutely observes, it also gestures towards the quaint 1950's reality conjured by “wholesomely American . . . Post brand cereal” (Royal 53), a commodity metonym for the WASPy Rockwellian cultural universe in which the Swede would dwell indefinitely if he could have his way.[69] Surprisingly, no one in the critical sphere has noted that, in the same breath, it obtrusively connotes Merry's “toasting” of the “post” office. This condensation of liberal post-identity politics, 1950's American idealism under the illusion of a coherent cultural metanarrative (as well as the American corporate advertising constitution and expropriation thereof), and Merry's act of terrorism is rich with import. The coagulation of the Swede's pastoral ideal and Merry's transgression thereof into the same “post toasty” trope suggests, among other things, that Merry's terrorism is of a piece with the Swede's pastoral nexus, a theme that bubbles to the surface throughout the novel. As such, the Swede's form of life organized around “the law of the

father," receives back its own message in inverted form. Above and beyond that, in the words of Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, ". . . Merry transgresses the body politic by bombing the Old Rimrock post office—signifier for both the Swede's pastoral home and an intelligible system of communication" (13). By engaging in a murderous act of terrorism, Merry ". . . sets herself radically outside her father's and liberalism's limits of tolerance, [whereby] the state should not intrude in private lives and private desires unless to protect others from harm" (Kumamoto Stanley 13). With the collapse of the Swede's liberal pastoral immunitary bulwark, "the plague America" leaks through even, or perhaps especially, at the semantic level. The Schmittian immunitary apparatus that once distinguished and protected health from illness, good from evil, sense from nonsense, and inside from outside has been exploded. And, in its wake, all things bleed into each other in a fashion that precludes seamlessly putting Humpty Dumpty back together again and attributes an imperious violence to any such nostalgic reassembly efforts, however naïve they may be.

Clearly, Zuckerman, who consistently packs the novel's pastoral tropes with counterpastoral valences would seem to have access to this brand of irony. But the Swede, who eventually awakens to the *Unheimlich* dimension of his pastoral form of life, was hitherto desensitized to this *Unbehagen*, this *dis-ease* circulating through the vascular system of his sanitized dwelling. Zuckerman writes of the young Swede, "there appeared to be not a drop of wit or irony to interfere with his golden gift for responsibility" (*Pastoral* 5). According to Jerry,

> The incessant questioning of a conscious adulthood was never something that obstructed [the Swede]. He got the meaning for his life some other way . . . . Some people thought he was simple because all his life he was so kind. But

> Seymour was never that simple. Simple is never that simple. Still, the self-questioning did take some time to reach him. And if there's anything worse than self-questioning coming too early in life, it's self-questioning coming too late. His life was blown up by that bomb. The real victim of that bombing was him. (*Pastoral* 68)

Jerry explicitly figures Mary's transgression as a message directed towards her father and his pastoral form of life: "It was him they were really out to get . . . . The bomb might as well have gone off in their living room" (70). The bomb was "a critique of [his] decorum" (274), an assertion that critics like Stanley, Gentry, Varvogli, Hogan, and Sutton take up and explore. The mediatic logic of this explosive purloined letter's conveyance, however, surpasses the level complexity imputed to it by any one analysis. This is, in large part, because the sophistication of the letter's itinerary can only be appropriately explicated through *re-medial* optics of the sort I used to interpret *White Noise* in the previous chapter.

5.6 Death and the Newark Maidens

It is precisely through the subtlety of the novel's polysemic troping that Roth pulls off the illusion of "good old-fashioned realism" (Gentry 76), which is insidiously unravelled by its often barely-perceptible subversive undercurrents. As such, notes Varvogli, "*American Pastoral* can be read as a trap, a novel that deceives those who do not pay close attention to its formal construction" (Varvogli 103). As my *re-medial* occupational analysis will demonstrate, this assessment is truer than even Varvogli realizes.

On the issue of the positions occupied by the women in Swede's life, Gentry observes

that the glove company's name, "Newark Maid," is symbolic. "The glove," writes Gentry, "is a girl, a maid to be moulded by the glovemaker into the lady he wants her to be. Swede expects his wife, Dawn, as well as his daughter and probably all women, like his gloves, to be the perfect products of his manufacturing process" (Gentry 79). Elaborating on this point, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley frames the configuration of the Swede's pastoral nexus: "Symbolically, for the Swede and his father, production and reproduction are intertwined: their modes of glove production [supposedly] do not produce alienating and meaningless work, and [likewise for] familial production" (Kumamoto Stanley 9). As the two primary discontents of the Swede's pastoral fantasy system, Merry and Dawn undergo homologous character arcs. Just as Merry's bomb blows up the Swede's life, so too does Dawn's infidelity (Gentry 80). Indeed, Dawn's facelift and her plan to construct a new house anticipate and prefigure her escape from the Swede's pastoral nexus, a sphere of activity that, it turns out, she is every bit as hostile to as Merry is. When all is said and done, she "thinks [their] catastrophe is over and so she is going to bury the past and start anew – face, house, husband, all new" (366). While the facelift constitutes a new skin, a *tabula rasa* out of the Swede's "American grain," the new house, and her expression of disdain for their Rimrock abode, reflects her desperate desire for a new lease on life. Casting off the odious beauty queen gloves that the Swede would have her adopt as a second skin—in spite of her repeated protests that she has always disliked being a beauty queen—and carving out an escape route from the Rimrock dwelling, Dawn tells the Swede, "Do you know what being Miss New Jersey did for my life? It ruined it . . . . You had to make me into a princess. Well, look where I have wound up! In a madhouse! Your princess is in a madhouse!" (178). Though the Swede remains oblivious to Dawn's antipathy towards his imposition of the pastoral form of life on her, it should come as no surprise that she forges third skins in the form

of a new occupational nexus and identity, a new home and a new life, to escape from the ones that her husband has imposed on her.

Much of the originality of Gentry's analysis resides in his observations about the Swede's, however unintentional, functionally malevolent attitude towards his wife and daughter, whom, at certain junctures, he treats as though they were commodities or domesticated animals. After the Swede visits his daughter, he thinks "if only she had become an animal" (238), for, as Gentry puts it, "only then he would be sure how to tame and mold her" (Gentry 81). Gentry's analysis does not go far enough here, however. As an imperious failed shepherd, the Swede, too, is repeatedly figured as an animal "in the power of something demented" (*Pastoral* 256). In contrast to the young Zuckerman's elevation of the Swede to the superhuman status of a neighbourhood Apollo, Jerry refers to him as "Bred to be dumb, built for convention" (65). As the Swede's world starts to become unglued, he realizes that "the Weathermen, the Panthers, the angry ragtag army of the violent Uncorrupted who called him a criminal . . . [were] *shepherding* him at long last to their truth" (256-7; my italics); by the same token, when Dawn is excoriating him for forcing her to be a beauty queen, she refers to him as "This huge animal I couldn't get rid of" (178).

This conflation with Count, the family's prize bull, whose name signifies both exalted status (as in *comte* – L. companion, i.e., of the Royal family) and thanatopolitical excrementality (to be reduced to a mere number and sent to the concentration camp or slaughterhouse, to be reduced to shambles, as, the Swede recalls, Count was), resurfaces at the end of the novel, when the Swede notices a portrait of Count and recalls Merry and Dawn's slogans: "*COUNT CAN DO WONDERFUL THINGS FOR YOUR HERD. IF EVER THERE WAS A BULL TO USE, IT'S*

COUNT. A BULL ON WHICH A HERD CAN BE BUILT . . . . YOU CAN COUNT ON COUNT" (372; Roth's emphasis). Inflamed with rage, he chastises an impassive Sheila for not helping him to protect his ostensibly helpless daughter, whom he would have locked in the house. Sheila responds that such an immunitary course of action was impossible because "[s]he's not an animal" (375). Though the furious Levov imagines himself "taking Count's picture off the wall and bludgeon[ing] her over the head with it" (373), and tells Sheila, "I could kill you!" (374), he refrains from acting on this impulse (smashing Count's picture frame instead), and "return[s] from the savagery of where he'[s] been to the solid and orderly ludicrousness of a dinner party" (379), confirming Jerry's assessment that he is a domesticated creature who is "a*fraid of letting the beast out of the bag*" (384; Roth's emphasis). Like Count, the Swede is very much "in the power of something demented," the dark underbelly of the utopian pastoral fantasy. And Zuckerman's account is, in fact, full of intimations that the utopian teleology with which the Swede was once identified misrepresents the operation of history and the Levov family's intergenerational dynamics.

In order to appropriately assess the role Merry occupies in the Swede's narrative universe, it is necessary to track the dense tangle of tropes through which Zuckerman unfolds the events leading up to the paroxysmic final scene of the novel. At the end of the frame narrative, as it begins its absorption into the imagined Swede's focalizing space, Zuckerman writes that "[h]istory, American history, the stuff you read about in books . . . had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock . . . and, improbably, with all its predictable unforeseenness, broke helter-skelter into the orderly household of the Seymour Levovs and left the place in a shambles" (27). The cluster of intertextual links packed into this pithy remark is almost too dense to follow, but in order to properly understand their import, it will be necessary to engage in a

hermeneutic “controlled detonation.”

As David Brauner points out in “Subverting History in *American Pastoral*,” critics should reflect on the the fact that the oxymoron ‘predictable unforeseenness’ echoes the novel’s William Carlos Williams epigraph: “If, as Williams counterintuitively suggests, the things that we expect to happen don't usually happen, then the corollary must be that most things that happen are unexpected. In this sense, Merry's bombing is paradoxically both predictable and startling” (Brauner 27). Merry's bombing is predictable according to a narrative logic that both the Swede and young Zuckerman are ill-equipped to interpret. After having read the novel, however, a careful reader will notice that Rimrock is not nearly as “untrafficked” as the Swede imagines it to be, especially if we take the adjective to denote both the absence of traffic and the absence of commerce. The Swede's Rimrock abode is, Rita reminds the Swede, constituted by concealed and displaced seething cauldrons of commerce and discord. Accordingly, the references to “helter skelter” and “shambles” are more significant than they appear at first glance. “Helter skelter,” misappropriated from the Beatles by Charles Manson, refers to an apocalyptic war that the swastika-tattooed Manson believed would take place between Caucasian and Black Americans, not a far cry from the state of affairs that Levov believes has been underway in Newark since the race riots of 1967 (with the Jews loosely aligned with the Whites, who still nonetheless harbour racist sentiments towards them). It is worth noting that Rita Cohen accuses the Swede of being a veritable plantation capitalist whose racist, classist exploitation of minority workers implicates him in the psychotic race war from which he exculpates himself on account of his magnanimity towards his Black employees. “Helter skelter,” Manson's apocryphal race war, also gestures towards the Vietnam War, in whose racist undercurrents Merry and Rita implicate the Swede.

By the same token, “[s]hambles” refers to another element that the Swede's occupational form of life suppresses from plain view. The term, which now colloquially refers to “disorder,” originally referred to a butcher's slaughterhouse or a stall in a meat market (*scamnum* is Latin for “bench”). The site of butchery, the systemic violence that “renders”[70] animals into leather for Newark Maid, is obscured from plain view because it takes places in slaughterhouses and tanneries. “Rough hewn” Lou Levov

> went to work in the tannery after leaving school at fourteen to help support the family of nine and became adept not only at dyeing buckskin by laying on the clay dye with a fiat, stiff brush but also at sorting and grading skins. The tannery that stank of both the slaughterhouse and the chemical plant from the soaking of flesh and the cooking of flesh and the dehairing and pickling and degreasing of hides, where round the clock in the summertime the blowers drying the thousands and thousands of hanging skins raised the temperature in the low-ceilinged dry room to a hundred and twenty degrees, where the vast vat rooms were dark as caves and flooded with swill, where brutish workingmen, heavily aproned, armed with hooks and staves, dragging and pushing overloaded wagons, wringing and hanging waterlogged skins, were driven like animals through the laborious storm that was a twelve-hour shift—a filthy, stinking place awash with water dyed red and black and blue and green, with hunks of skin all over the floor, everywhere pits of grease, hills of salt, barrels of solvent—this was Lou Levov's high school and college. What was amazing was not how tough he turned out. What was amazing was how civil he could sometimes still manage to be. (11-12)

To “flesh out” the relevance of Stanley's invocation of Weber's critique of the protestant work ethic, the operations of Satanic mills such as the one Lou Levov worked at as a child “render” possible the Swede's sterilized Weberian glove factory, where every step in the manufacturing process is optimized and rationally overdetermined in a “civil” environment. The glove, we will remember, is the very icon of civilization for the Swede, but it is an icon whose proper functioning necessitates the systematic veiling and compartmentalization of its visceral, uncivilized, racialized material-economic substratum. Such veiling of race and violence is constitutive of both the Swede's occupational nexus and his personality structure. By the end of the Swede's life, when Newark has been reduced to a hollowed-out former workshop of the world, a wasteland seething with racial tensions, all of the manufacturing is outsourced to Asian factories, where the Swede laments, “people . . . don't know a fourchette from a thumb” (27). As the fine glove craftsman knows, a “fourchette,” a word that is cognate with “fork,” is the pocket of a glove. As my analysis will demonstrate, the “grotesque”[71] world in which the Swede has found himself is one in which the prophylactic glove, the very bedrock of his fortress, is transfigured into a deadly fork aimed directly at the nerve center of his pastoral fantasy system. While the Swede's pastoral immunitary habitat is organized around the principle of timelessness, a kind of simulacral land that time forgot, Merry represents the irruption of history's unfinished revolutions into the liberal inner sanctum of Western civilization. Merry, and the other “Newark Maid[s],” introduce the Swede to “real time,” whereby history is not just sudden; it “stutters.”

All of these undercurrents continue to ramify over the course of the narrative. When Rita Cohen visits the Swede's factory under the guise of a school trip, the Swede adopts her as a surrogate daughter and refers to her diminutively as “honey.” After humouring the Swede's condescending diatribe about the intricacies and metaphorics of the glove business, she reveals

her “true” identity as a comrade of his daughter's. When the Swede next visits Rita, rather than giving up Merry, she berates “the cherished and triumphant paragon who is in actuality the criminal. The great Swede Levov, all American capitalist criminal” (*Pastoral* 139) for behaving like a plantation owner towards his “brown and yellow” employees in China and Puerto Rico (*Pastoral* 133). Shortly thereafter, he visits a “psychopathic” (*Pastoral* 142) looking Rita, who attempts to seduce Levov in a scene that requires far more unpacking than it has yet to receive. This is, in part, because what is going on in this scene must be understood in dialogue with an unwieldy multiplicity of elements unfurling and articulating across multiple scenes. When viewed together, these scenes constitute a tableau of interpenetrating vignettes that inform each other when viewed through *re-medial* optics.

When Rita insists that the Swede have sex with her, she invokes one of the “primal scenes” of Merry's aberration that the Swede has speculated about—when the Swede mishandled the toddler Merry's request for a matrimonial kiss and evasively ridiculed her stutter before kissing her on the lips; Rita says, “Let's f-f-fuck, D-d-d-dad” (*Pastoral* 143) and then, when he refuses, excoriates him for being a “capitalist dog” who must emanate the “purity” appropriate to a “pillar of society” (*Pastoral* 143). The Swede, who under normal circumstances is figured as a veritable “Superman of certainties”[72] (*Pastoral* 144), feels as though he is under attack from a barrage of “verbal violence” (*Pastoral* 144). But his horror is amplified by his own paralytic ambivalence, induced by an unexpected concomitant arousal for his surrogate daughter Rita. Offering to “get [him] out there on the frontiers of reality” (*Pastoral* 144), she mockingly invites him to engage in sexual intercourse with her. Through his cracked pastoral lens, which still accords more violence to such pornographic “subjective” assaults than to the systemic violence that makes his affluence possible, “[s]he ha[s] brought to the hotel a stick of dynamite to throw

. . . . To blow him up" (*Pastoral* 145).

Rita's own act of "subjective" counterviolence on the Swede's systemically-violent pastoral nexus alienates the Swede from the foundational organizing principles of his occupational sphere; this induces "so much emotion in him, so much uncertainty, so much inclination and counterinclination, . . . bursting so with impulse and counterimpulse . . . . All his thinking seem[s] to be taking place in a foreign language" (*Pastoral* 147); this foreignness, this *Unheimlich* alienness at the core of the American pastoral, embeds itself in the fabric of the Swede's concept of civilized humanity. The only satisfactory escape from this impasse would be to transgress his civilized code of conduct and beat her. But, being a man to whom violence is anathema, he can't. So he escapes the deadlock by leaving the room. Later, however, he thinks "that he should have fucked the conniving little sexual terrorist until she was his slave" (*Pastoral* 166). And, even more disturbingly, he tells himself, "If she is anywhere near my daughter, I'll pour gasoline all over that hair and set the little cunt on fire" (*Pastoral* 383), which Monica Hogan identifies as a reference to the television images of self-immolating Vietnamese monks that so fascinated young Merry (Hogan 11). Swede's thoughts of violent retribution towards what Hogan characterizes as a racialized, exoticized Rita (Hogan 11-12) betoken an implicit complicity with the systemic violence perpetrated in the service of the dominant order in spite of the Swede's avowed nonviolence. In Žižekian terms, these rare moments of virtual rage, however unactualized, seem to suggest a very real correlation between the racist state-level systemic violence from which the Swede would abstractly exculpate himself and his everyday empirical interactions. In these private fantasies, the Swede is, in fact, occupying the position of racist, sexist patriarchal authority imputed to him by Merry and Rita. The Swede' master trope, the glove, is bound up with much more than the American pastoral fantasy of placid security. It is

also complicit with everything it disavows: the violent, meaningless war, the oppression of racialized workers, misogyny, and the slaughter of animals that are rendered into leather.

The scene in which the Swede finds and confronts Merry operates according to a dense *re-medial* logic. When the Swede finally learns of Merry's whereabouts, in the hollowed out "carcass" (*Pastoral* 235) of Newark, where, when it was still economically vibrant, Newark Maid had been stationed until Levov finally closed up shop and outsourced his glove manufacturing operation to Asia, he visits her at her squalid apartment in a "piss-soaked building" (*Pastoral* 265). Merry reveals that she has been raped and converted to Jainism, a religion she read about in libraries while on the run, and, in a radical reversal of her activist self-assertion, has withdrawn into an unhygienic asceticism and disavowed worldly activity, which she deems to be unethically violent. Still trying desperately to assert control over the situation and rescue her from her predicament, he attempts to persuade her that she has been "parroting the clichés of others" (an accusation that could be leveled just as easily towards the Swede himself), on whose shoulders the Swede would like to place responsibility for his impressionable daughter's violent malfeasances and the current state of her life. This characterization of Merry as excessively impressionable is a repeated refrain: since she was a child, she "[a]lways pretending to be someone else" (*Pastoral* 242). Under-lying this projection of responsibility onto others is a desperate need to exculpate her (and, by extension, his own occupational sphere) for her inscrutable actions. For her part, in a gesture that should be read as a *re-mediation* of the Swede's own *modus vivendi*, Merry, who could be said to have absorbed the Swede's own spongelike impressionability, claims, ironically, that she has abandoned any pursuit of craving and selfhood, which she advises the Swede to do as well, and that he should blame her alone. "Abhorr me," she tells him. In a moment of violent assertion out of keeping with his lifelong

unconfrontational character, he pries her mouth open and smells

> a mad human being who grubs about for pleasure in its own shit . . . . She is disgusting. His daughter is a human mess stinking of human waste. Her smell is the smell of everything organic breaking down. It is the smell of no coherence. It is the smell of all she's become. She could do it, and she did do it, and this reverence for life is the final obscenity. (*Pastoral* 265)

Monica Hogan sees the Swede's revulsion as symptomatic of his unconscious misogyny. The Swede's apparatus of civility is short-circuited by "the world of oozing flesh and bodiliness – a visceral world" (Hogan 9), what Julia Kristeva refers to as "the abject" (Kristeva 1-2). And he fears "that his head [will] spew out his brains just as Kennedy's did when he was shot" (*Pastoral* 256). Like Kennedy, the charismatic media figurehead of American manifest destiny and culture legibility, the Swede is besieged by the violent incoherence of the era. In spite of the death-denying architecture of his occupational universe, he is exposed to the forces of annihilation he had hoped to keep at bay.

Part of the subtle irony of the scene, in fact, emerges out of Zuckerman's ruminations on his way to find Merry. Above the roofline of her home, in the decaying vestiges of what was "once the focal point of a buzzing downtown," he sees an old signboard for First Fidelity Bank, "[a] sign in which only a madman could believe. A sign in a fairy tale." (*Pastoral* 237). Even though the Swede is becoming deliberately "ironic," that is to say aware of the schism separating the pastoral "fairy tale" from the experiential reality, what Zuckerman knows but the Swede does not yet realize is that, above and beyond the world's perfidious lack of self-identity, a more specific brand of infidelity, his wife's affair with Orcutt, has violated his "fairy tale" castle from

within (a fate we will recall befell Arthur in Camelot as well).

Another fold of ironic dissimulation emerges out of Zuckerman-Swede's speculation about the manifest destiny of the Levovs just before entering her building: “Three generations. All of them growing. The working. The saving. The success. Three generations in raptures over America. Three generations of becoming one with a people. And now with the fourth it had all come to nothing. The total vandalization of their world” (*Pastoral* 237). The *re-medial* irony of the passage hinges on the term “rapture,” whose surface meaning, “spiritual ecstasy” at the “End of History,” is undermined by its cognation with “seizure, rape, kidnapping, apprehension” (“Rapture”). The pastoral form of life meant to empower the Levovs to “grasp” and wield the world has culminated in their progeny's rapacious “apprehension,” a grotesque fate about which the Swede is about to learn, a tragic fate towards which he no longer has the privilege of self-imposed blindness. The Swede, like Merry, has been apprehended by a toxic *Unbehagen* that no immunitary apparatus can filter out. As such, the Swede's vomit is an autoimmunitary response to the capillary action of a noxious “abject” that passes back and forth between them.

5.7 Counterpastoral *Ob-Scenery*: Putting an End to Civil Lies

The novel ends in 1974, during the Watergate trials, with a drawn-out dinner party at the Levov's Rimrock abode, where all of the currents circulating through the novel come to a head in a fashion that is best unpacked with the interpretive tools developed over the course of this dissertation. Orcutt and his wife, Professor Marcia Umanoff and her husband, speech therapist, Lou and Sylvia Levov are all in attendance. During the party, the Swede discovers that Dawn has been conducting a furtive affair with Orcutt, whom she has long been pretending to dislike in order to deceive her husband, thereby unhinging perhaps the last lynchpins of certainty in the

Swede's already unhinged pastoral nexus. Much of the dinner table conversation turns on the Watergate scandal and *Deep Throat*, the first pornographic film to enjoy mainstream success in America, a phenomenon that Lou attempts to comprehend through a rambling diatribe about the glove business. Lou is offended that cinemas are, as he sees it, exposing young children to pornography of the sort that, in his day, was hidden from plain view. But the phenomenon is self-evidently too unwieldy for any sovereign regime or Lou's narrative to contain or suppress.

"Deep Throat" is also the pseudonym that *Washington Post* Journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein assigned to their "deep cover" informant, Mark Felt, whose anonymous divulgences of Richard Nixon's criminal acts, which are in turn broadcast into most every American household, are in the process of bringing the President down (decline of presidential paternal authority, paternal figure's toppling by mediatic bombardment), whose corruption and warmongering Lou and Seymour, under Merry's influence, have taken issue with in spite of their otherwise Republican predilections. Lou is offended by the crass commingling of politics and pornography, whose level of mainstream penetration and saturation would have been unthinkable in what he sees as America's heyday. Orcutt explains to Lou that there is no way to buffer one's family against the pornographic: "It leaks in . . . whether we like it or not. Whatever is out there leaks in. It pours in. It's not the same out there anymore" (*Pastoral* 345). Lou can only respond by nostalgizing about a time when pornography was properly compartmentalized behind the right "gates," as it were, and politics was ostensibly simpler and more culturally legible. Lou's diatribe keeps fanning outward, attempting to apprehend, contain, and master a pornographic world that refuses his atavistic immunitary measures. Though Lou's wife repeatedly interjects that his sprawling polemical anecdote about the glove business is irrelevant, that he is "monopolizing" the conversation with his fixation on his master trope, he remains oblivious and

redoubles his effort to rhetorically master an unmasterable world. In fact, the exact opposite happens. The manifold *ob-scene*—the unwieldly infiltration of "other scenes"—engulfs and contaminates everything.

Orcutt attempts to convey to Lou that his anachronistic form of life, organized around containment strategies, is no longer an effectual weapon or corrective in the battle against the plague America: "Permissiveness. Abnormality cloaked as ideology. The perpetual protest . . . . The grotesque is supplanting everything commonplace that people love about this country. Today, to be what they call 'repressed' is a source of shame to people—as not to be repressed used to be" (*Pastoral* 348). And Lou, seemingly in agreement, launches into an even more intricate and irrelevant diatribe about the way the glove industry used to be and bemoans the fact that world is no longer properly configured and immunized against obscenity, lumping violence, pornography, drugs, and divorce into one envelope. Even a flummoxed Swede, echoing Sheila Saltzman, tells his father, "you can't . . . take these kids and lock them up in their rooms and throw away the key" (*Pastoral* 358). Nonetheless, Lou refuses to acknowledge the impotence of the law of the father, and its immunitary mechanisms of containment and repression, in an intensely *re-medial* age.

He remains "an opinionated old man, fettered still to his fantasy of the world," (*Pastoral* 361), which induces the professor, Marcia Umanoff, to antagonize his fantasy system with a defense of *Deep Throat*'s star actress, Linda Lovelace, who Umanoff figures as a 20th century Eve whose obscene "transgression" makes new forms of knowledge possible. But Lou only sees a woman who is "poisoning young minds, poisoning the country, and making herself the scum of the earth" (*Pastoral* 361). It is noteworthy, given the misogyny of the Levov's occupational

project, that Lou, the pater familia and founder of Newark Maid, opts to scapegoat Lovelace, isolating her as a locus of abject bodily contagion. She represents, according to his patriarchal fantasy of the world, a kind of anti-Newark-Maid, whose transgression of his occupational boundaries overtakes the Levovian hypochondriacal self when the glove comes off.[73] In addition to the pornographic film and the Watergate scandal, *Deep Throat* seems to represent the centrifugal unfurling of a succession of barely repressed *ob-scenes*, literally "other scenes," threatening to penetrate and engulf the timeless nexus Lou would like too preserve. This constitutes a tropological permissiveness that, according to Roth/Zuckerman's figuration of this *re-medial* nexus, points to the upending of longstanding patriarchal kinship relations that regulate, among other things, the propriety of sex and the body, and represents Merry's transgressive "perpetual protest" and violenc —*Deep Throat*, after all, points towards Merry's stutter as well as Rita's pornographic representation thereof. It also gestures towards Dawn's early beauty pageant career and recently-disclosed marital infidelity. Marcia compares beauty pageants to prostitution, and the Swede is overcome with pornographic imaginings of Dawn and Orcutt. *Deep Throat* also, of course, evokes the nausea that Merry's abject state induces in the Swede. Everything oozes, vomits, and bleeds into everything else and no rhetoric is capable of grasping and articulating the contours of this ineffable muck: "The old system that made order doesn't work anymore. All that [is] left [is] … fear and astonishment" (*Pastoral* 422).[74] Tragically, for those naive *epigones* who maintain fidelity to the old immunitary systems, the "staid, stone-faced" fortress is far beyond the point of being besieged by the plague America; its porous vestiges constitute the false front of a bulwark whose sovereign, if ever there was one, has long since been usurped.

The ending of the novel can be properly understood only through a *re-medial* lens. When

Jessie Orcutt stabs a paternalistic, patronizing Lou Levov near the eye with a fork, this is the autoimmunitary spasm of an atavistic immunitary strategy turned against itself. It is the blowback of an unviable containment strategy that never wanted to be conscious of its own implications. After Marcia stabs Lou, Swede-Zuckerman describes "the once-imposing father, the giant of the family" (*Pastoral* 421) as helpless:

> His face was vacant of everything except the struggle not to weep. He appeared helpless to prevent even that. He could not prevent anything. He never could, though only now did he look prepared to believe that manufacturing a superb ladies' dress glove in quarter sizes did not guarantee the making of a life that would fit to perfection everyone he loved. Far from it. You think you can protect a family and you cannot protect even yourself. There seemed to be nothing left of the man . . . who neglected no one in his crusade against disorder, against the abiding problem of human error and insufficiency. The combatant had borne all the disappointment he could. Nothing blunt remained within him for bludgeoning deviancy to death . . . . Deviancy prevailed. (*Pastoral* 422-3)

In an obvious riff on Oedipus and the psychoanalytic concept of symbolic castration, the paternal figure has his impotence revealed to him. And his heir apparent, too, is forced to confront his powerlessness in the face of an *ob-scene* digital modernity: the opposable thumb of the phallic occupational glove that once bludgeoned deviancy to death is *re-mediated* into a "fourchette," which is, in turn, transfigured into a fork that winds back around to assault the patriarchal *pater familia*; and the Rimrock fortress is *re-mediated* into the radically exposed rim of the rock within an uncontainably toxic and obscene world.

After stabbing Lou, Jessie shows "no remorse, . . . seem[s] to have been stripped of all receptors and all transmitters, without a single cell to notify her that she ha[s] overstepped a boundary fundamental to civilized life" (*Pastoral* 422-3) and Marcia descends into a maniacal fit of laughter

> at their obtuseness to the flimsiness of the whole contraption, to laugh and laugh and laugh at them all, pillars of a society that, much to her delight, [is] rapidly going under—to laugh and to relish . . . how far the rampant disorder ha[s] spread, enjoying enormously the assailability, the frailty, the enfeeblement of supposedly robust things. (*Pastoral* 423)

The "astonishing" (literally, "turning to stone") feminine principle, "The Laugh of the Medusa,"[75] channeled now by Jessie, who has been stripped of civilized receptors and transmitters, and Marcia Umanoff, the veritable Martian whose human civility has been turned off, gestures towards a state of affairs that is not merely post-pastoral; it radiates out of a monstrously post human milieu in which hitherto unimagined occupational psychoses will emerge out of ever-new blinking circuits of receptors and transmitters. "What [is] he, stripped of all the signs he flashed?" (*Pastoral* 410). Denuded of his immunitary medial ecology and excommunicated from the pastoral fold, destitute "See more" Levov can no longer contain his dread by turning a blind eye. What was America to the Swede and his ilk is now irremediably Martian. Monstrous predators are inside the gate. "Yes, the breach ha[s] been pounded in their fortification, even out here in secure Old Rimrock, and . . . [it will] not be closed again" (*Pastoral* 423).

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Over the fourteen-year period from 1985 to 1998, the "occupational violence" subgenre of American masculinist fiction consolidated itself and evolved through novels like *White Noise*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *American Pastoral*. In each of these texts, the privileged white male protagonist has constructed an occupational universe consisting of the interoriented spheres of work, domesticity, and recreation meant to buffer them against the often classed, raced, and gendered forces of annihilation that lie without. And in every one of these cases, the occupational universe turns out to be a porous mediasphere that *re-mediates* the protagonist's and reader's futile efforts to stabilize the field.

As I have demonstrated, in *White Noise*, Jack Gladney seeks refuge in his family and occupational station as a professor of Hitler Studies. However, his increasingly desperate pursuit of shelter is constantly undermined by the operations of his occupational lifeworld comprised of work, domestic life, and consumption. The occupational media network that Gladney inhabits ceaselessly *re-mediates* all hitherto stable coordinates, ranging from the reliability of empirical evidence to the cultural primacy of white masculinity, into refractory "waves and radiation." This dissertation takes its cue from Gladney's ultimate decision to tap into "the network of meanings" in order to ascertain the contours of the "American environments" figured in the genre that DeLillo inaugurates with *White Noise*.

In *American Psycho*, the world outside of the privileged white male protagonist's privileged occupational lifeworld is troped more obtrusively as classed, raced, and gendered "filth." Patrick Bateman's efforts to insulate himself involve not only moving around in an

immunized bubble of urban privilege—from his opulent apartment to his workplace to New York's exclusive restaurants and bars—but also perpetrating acts of gratuitous and often sexual violence on those individuals whose existence he cannot tolerate on account of their obstruction of his manufactured desires. Bateman's psychotic drive to impose what he perceives as hygiene on his occupational media habitat takes on the form of an auto-immunitary paroxysm whereby he cannot distinguish toxin from remedy. Unlike Jack Gladney, who ultimately discovers a kind of attunement to, and measure of agency within, the field of "white noise," Patrick Bateman is thoroughly ventriloquized by the chauvinistic mediasphere: Bateman's assertions of patriarchal mastery are a mirage that mask an abysmal lack of interiority. Even his sensationalistic acts of violence may represent nothing more than the wish-fulfilling hallucinations of a hapless byproduct of the Culture Industry. According to this line of interpretation, Bateman figures as more of an avatar for the spirit of Reagan-era America than an actual person.

Like *White Noise*, *Fight Club* follows the story of an American white male protagonist whose occupational universe—encompassing his job, domestic life, and modes of recreation—is organized around an insulated, subjectively-peaceful, normative masculine existence. This tranquil occupational sphere, situated within the confines of a late-capitalist urban American milieu, comes to a head, engendering a *re-medial* cascade of illness, psychosis, and violence. The groundswell of violence underlying the protagonist's subjectively peaceful, disembodied consumer lifestyle bubbles to the surface (condensed in the figure of Tyler Durden), first as viscerally emancipatory combat and then, increasingly, through the terrorism of the systemic violence his occupational life was originally organized around suppressing. But, as with *Fight Club*'s generic forebears, every new emancipatory pursuit of immediacy and health *re-medially* engenders a new modality of illness.

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, depicting the rise and fall of narrator Nathan Zuckerman's childhood hero Seymour "Swede" Levov, reimagines the Swede's adult life in order to speculate about how a man figured as a paragon of the post-World-War-II Jewish American dream of peace, prosperity, and assimilation could produce a violent terrorist daughter. As I have shown, in order to understand the intricacies of its operations, Levov's specific occupational nexus must, like those of *American Pastoral*'s generic predecessors, be analyzed in terms of its complex mediating functions: the vital nodes of Levov's American occupational universe—the ball field, his home in historic Old Rimrock, and the family's glove business—constitute a "pastoral" fortress meant to protect the Swede against the onslaught of perceived gendered, raced, and classed threats; unbeknownst to the Swede, however, the protective pastoral nexus is a porous media network that *re-mediates* and beams in the unwieldy violence to which he would sooner turn a blind eye. As in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, the terror represented in *American Pastoral* turns out to be profoundly home-grown.

But since the publication of *American Pastoral*, this subgenre of American masculinist fiction, still oriented towards a perceived immunitary crisis in white masculinity, has continued to articulate itself centrifugally through other national literatures and media forms. This remediation of the subgenre signals that the *re-medial* paradigm, bound up with the deracinating flickerings of the *pharmakon* in the new mediasphere, remains a relevant prism on the operations of contemporary fiction, even in the age of Web 2.0. I will conclude this study with a brief survey of some of the genre's most iridescent second-wave ramifiers, all of which require more thorough analyses through the "occupational violence" lens.

One of the most important recent international postcolonial participants in this "occupational violence" genre is Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), about the travails of David Lurie,

who is, like Jack Gladney, a humanities professor. Lurie, a professor of Romantic literature at a small South African technical university, conducts his occupational life as a self-styled "servant of Eros" (Coetzee 52), indentured to the repetition-automatisms of "the pleasure principle" (199), whereby all women who attract his attention—prostitutes, a secretary, students—are, apropos of Patrick Bateman's *modus vivendi*, relatively interchangeable and obligated to make themselves available to him. When he is caught preying on a young, probably indigenous female student, Melanie Isaacs, the university administration calls on Lurie to account for his behavior. A recalcitrant Lurie refuses to explain himself, is reprimanded for his perceived malfeasance, and is, consequently, forced to leave his job. "Disgraced," David decides to leave Capetown for the hinterlands of the Eastern Cape, where his daughter Lucy lives. Shortly after his arrival, they experience a home invasion, during which his daughter is raped and he is nearly murdered. Like *American Pastoral* and *American Psycho*, in particular, the diegetic universe of *Disgrace* operates at both an individual and national allegorical register: "Written after the 1994 elections in South Africa," writes Kimberly Wedeven Segall, "J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* offers a dark depiction of South Africa's transitional tremors, for the legacy of apartheid does not dissipate overnight" (41). Lurie's fall from immunitary grace, descent into subjective destitution, and incremental steps in the direction, perhaps, of redemption, at the end of the novel involve a radical undermining of the patriarchal chains of equivalence subtending his white, male, "postcolonial" occupational privilege.

Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005), which is usually translated as *Hidden* but could just as easily be translated as *Enfolded*, *Repressed*, or *Stored*, has a great deal in common with *Disgrace*. It too is about a privileged white male academic, this time a European one, whose life takes on "postcolonial" allegorical resonances as he, too, endures a succession of

home invasions, of sorts. The protagonist, Georges Laurent, has his quaint Parisian life disrupted when he receives a number of anonymously-filmed surveillance tapes of the exterior of his family's home and disturbing crayon drawings depicting scenes of violent mutilation. The episode leads to questions about Georges' early life and precipitates a visit to the apartment of George's former foster brother Majid, an Algerian man whose parents, once in the employ of Georges' parents, were killed by Paris police while protesting the Algerian War. The orphaned Majid was subsequently allowed to live with the Laurents until an envious young Georges manipulatively arranged to have him removed from the household. Surmising that a vengeful Majid had something to do with the missives, Georges locates and confronts his long-lost semi-sibling, who denies having sent the tapes or drawings. However, the encounter precipitates Georges' flashbacks of a young Majid spitting blood and cutting off a rooster's head. Proclaiming his innocence, Majid kills himself in front of Georges and his actual complicity in the harassment is put into question by the activities of his son and Georges' own son, Pierrot, both of whom are, without explanation, shown meeting up during the film's closing credits, thereby setting in motion a retroactive *re-medial* subversion of the "postcolonial" immunitary assumptions about what constitutes the inside and the outside of George's privileged occupational lifeworld. This *re-medial* landscape, though it has a great deal in common with those of *White Noise* and *American Pastoral*, in particular, also articulates anxieties about a post-9/11 surveillance *Zeitgeis*t, what media theorist Benjamin Bratton refers to as "inverted panoptic[ism]" (Bratton), whereby subjects now know they are being monitored but are compelled to behave as though this is not the case.

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) contends with the collapsing integrity of the American border security apparatus, which Sherriff Ed Tom Bell is tasked with

policing. The impossibility of the Sherriff's occupational mandate, which is consubstantial with the national border's immunitary function, is condensed in the nefarious figure of Anton Chigurh, who, like *White Noise*'s Willie Mink, is a "staticky" condensation of ethnic alterity. Chigurh, once again, like Mink, is figured as an agent of the *pharmakon*: he is a drug cartel assassin tasked with hunting down Llewelyn Moss, who has accidentally stumbled upon and purloined a case full of the cartel's money in the wake of an apparent drug deal gone sour. The itinerary of Chigurh, who, on the trail of the case of cash (which is fitted with a GPS tracking system), flips a coin to determine whether he will kill his victims, takes on the trappings of the ruthless circulation of transnational capital itself, and Chigurh's very existence is put into question, as he may be nothing more than an avatar for the inscrutably violent operations of neoliberal globalization in the wake of an indefensible national border. Importantly, like *American Pastoral*, *No Country for Old Men* opens onto the frontier of a thanatopolitical pastoral (here, situated along the South Texas pastoral milieu that constitutes the story's neo-Western setting) without a sovereign shepherd. An implacable Chigurh, the spectral agent of this new cybernetic reality, invades dwellings and executes his victims with a cattle prod, ominously signaling that history may end not with so-called-man's apotheosis in a disembodied data stream but with "his" radical bestialization. And Bell, the would-be guarantor of security on this new frontier of "metaphysical evil" (*No Country* 3) is, in the end, left with no choice but to abdicate his occupational post.

Quick on the heels of their film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* (2007), Joel and Ethan Coen wrote and directed *A Serious Man* (2009), a film directly in conversation with McCarthy's *thanato*pastoral as well as *White Noise* and *American Pastoral*. The protagonist, Larry Gopnik, a fearful small-town university professor (like Gladney) who lives his life in

fidelity to an atavistic code (like Seymour Levov), has his homeostatic life turned upside down by succession of crises which his occupational form of life is ill-equipped to buffer him against. As a physics professor, Larry Gopnik (a name that means something like "hapless jerk" in Yiddish) is tasked with teaching Heisenbergian-Schrodingerian quantum mechanics to his high-level post-secondary class. Gopnik's attempt to explain "Schrodinger's Cat," a paradoxical thought experiment designed to articulate the counter-intuitive mathematical logic that describes subatomic reality, serves as a touchstone to the "uncertainty" in which he becomes entangled as the fantasy coordinates undergirding his understanding of his everyday life become unmoored with the deracinating advent of the 1960's, whose psychotropic effects on Gopnik are conveyed not just through the text of the Coens' screenplay but also through their sophisticated orchestration of psychedelic rock music and hallucinatory cinematography. *A Serious Man* stages the atavistic subject's experience of bewilderment in a world that deludes him into believing that the human predicament can be properly explicated even though his every hapless attempt to get a reliable handle on its narrative logic (be it scientific, religious, or commonsensical) fails miserably. The immunitary occupational habitat meant to shield him against the impending forces of annihilation turns out to be an all-too-porous mediasphere.

Recent television series have also been very much on the front lines of the "occupational violence" genre. One of the most significant of these has been David Chase's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), about Tony Soprano, a turn-of-the-millennium New Jersey mafia boss who visits a psychoanalyst to treat his panic attacks, which she diagnoses as the psychic consequence of his recognition that his occupation, the world of his mafia "family," both supports and imperils the ultimate well-being of his nuclear "family." Much of the series follows Tony's efforts to both maintain his precarious grip on power and shelter his children from knowing about or being

negatively impacted by his participation in the mafia. However, in the age of the Internet and a post-9/11 climate of heightened surveillance, it becomes increasingly impractical for him to sequester his two occupational domains, his two "families," from each other or the world at large. One way or another, the show seems to suggest, Tony will be forced to "sing Soprano" and relinquish his status as the paternal figure of sovereign masculine authority reigning over the two families that constitute his occupational nexus.

Director Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) also documents the defensive and offensive maneuvers of an idiosyncratic organized crime kingpin, of sorts, one who inhabits a death-denying occupational nexus. The series' protagonist, Walter White, is, true to his namesake, a white, middle class high school chemistry teacher who, upon discovering that he suffers from lung cancer, employs his occupational expertise to synthesize and sell methamphetamine to pay for the expensive medical treatment required to keep his rapidly-metastasizing tumours at bay. The occupational trope of "chemistry," the science of transformation comes to represent not only the transformation of material substances but of character and occupation, as Walter White, the mild-mannered white, middle-class chemistry teacher, is transformed into the drug kingpin "Heisenberg." Like Tony Soprano's, White's occupational sphere eventually comes into conflict with his domestic sphere, and his entire occupational house of cards inevitably comes crashing down in phenomenal fashion as the cancer resurfaces. Death is, as White discovers, undeniable.

Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* (2007-2015), another recent AMC series, follows the occupational exploits of Don Draper, a Madison Avenue ad man, or "mad man," who revolutionizes the world of advertising. Draper (perhaps modelled loosely on Draper Daniels,

inventor of the Marlboro Man) works in advertising in the 1960's, at the historical moment when the American Food and Drug Administration places strict constraints on the kind of advertising campaigns that cigarette companies are permitted to promulgate. No longer allowed to advertise the putative medical benefits of cigarette-smoking, Lucky Strike comes to Draper's firm for a new marketing strategy. Draper frames the FDA's decision as a gift because it compels Lucky Strike to single itself out with seductive marketing narratives that evade didacticism altogether. It turns out that Draper himself is a seductive marketing narrative, a fabricated, "mad" alter-ego invented by a man named Dick Whitman (a name that merits just as much critical scrutiny as "Walter White" and "Tony Soprano" for its racial and phallic connotations), who wants desperately to reinvent himself and erase all traces of his ignominious previous life as a "hapless jerk." As such, *Mad Men* figures as a kind of sustained allegory about the birth, seductive lures, and perils of the Global Village's duplicitous corporate infrastructure.

Perhaps the most thoroughly contemporary "occupational violence" narrative at the moment is the ongoing Netflix streaming television series *House of Cards* (2013 –), which is partly-based on a BBC series of the same name. *House of Cards* is the story of American political power couple Frank and Claire Underwood's ruthless pursuit of the Presidency and Vice Presidency. In *House of Cards*, the occupational and domestic spheres meld into one as the Underwoods dedicate their ruthless attention to acquiring and maintaining power in a world where digital telecommunication networks figure as a weapon whose direction, surveillance capacities, and ability to induce terror cannot be mastered, even by the President. The White House is, like "the Swede's castle," a treacherous house of cards.

As 9/11, the Bush presidency, and eventually the Obama presidency descend into the dustbin of history and the Internet continues to extend its penetration into everyday life and every occupational sphere, the "occupational violence" genre will continue to ramify and fan outward in accordance with the metamorphosis of the world and the experiences and concerns of those who occupy it. Perhaps this genre that is bound up with the crisis in white masculinity, the occupational universe, the manifold experience of violence, and the emergence of the new mediasphere will one day dissolve and fade away with the arrival of a harmonious new post-capitalist era of racial and gender equality and environmental revivification. However, as I write this conclusion at a time when it is conceivable that Patrick Bateman's hero Donald Trump could become the next President of the United States, it seems to me at least as likely that the Reagan-era systemic inequalities, hypocrisies, and media environments that rendered the "occupational violence" genre possible in the first place will continue to be *re-mediated* in new media contexts for some time to come.

Endnotes

[1] In his analysis of Lacan's conjuncture of Kant and Sade, Žižek underscores the Sadean dimension of the Kantian categorical imperative and, by extension, the superegoic tribunal, which ceaselessly flagellates the neurotic subject for his inability to properly discharge his duties. This inability is never, however, the result of occupational incompetence; it is rather constitutive of Judeo-Christianic ethics, whose broad strictures are often too vague to provide guidance even to those who would gladly follow them (*Parallax* 95).

[2] The very title of Brown's essay clearly evokes the titles of both Roth's and Easton Ellis' novels.

[3] Strangely, unlike Santner and Brown, Žižek does not delve very deeply into Foucault's corpus, instead deferring primarily to Agamben's tendentious reading of Foucault. Esposito (2008) deals with some of the pitfalls of adopting Agamben's thanatopolitical declension.

[4] For Žižek, one point of convergence of biopolitical and psychoanalytical thought is Agamben's concept of "bare life," which Žižek equates with the Lacanian "*lamella*," an alien pulsion that lurks within and threatens to disrupt all socio-symbolic activity. This organ (without a body) of the libido is the imaginary aspect of the Real death drive that disrupts all cultural figurations (*Parallax* 121).

[5] Žižek follows Agamben in his critique of Carl Schmitt's valorization of the sovereign's unproblematically legitimate "state of exception," both outside and inside the law. What Schmitt's fascist account deliberately overlooks is the primordial and ineffaceable foundational violence perpetrated in the founding of a great many states and institutions ("Soft Targets").

[6] Zizek's concept of "symbolic violence" should not be confused with Pierre Bourdieu's (1994), which emerges out of his account of the relation between "symbolic capital" and exclusionary power structures.

[7] Here, Joan Copjec's (1993) stunning analysis of the emergence of the noir universe out of the biopolitical "avalanche of numbers" is instructive and leads to the inevitable conclusion that *Fight Club* must be viewed as a neo-noir novel, a claim that sheds a great deal of light on the logic subtending the sensationalistic depictions of hypermasculinity and misogyny that saturate the text.

[8] This is also a text of immense interest to contemporary critics concerned with a different inflection of "occupation," the Occupy Wall Street movement, about which Žižek concludes his book-length study *Violence*, "Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do" (*Violence* 180).

[9] In precisely this regard, Judy Segal (2008) characterizes hypochondria as a sophisticated rhetorical preoccupation: "The hypochondriac is . . . someone who is susceptible to the persuasive force of experiences that are by a process of internal rhetoric transformed into symptoms of particular diseases" (80). For Segal, this dynamic has expressly Burkean overtones pertaining to the agent's immersion in a bewilderingly ambiguous "*scene* for hypochondria" (81).

[10] On this point, Sloterdijk is particularly indebted to Roberto Esposito (2002), whose "immunitary paradigm" sets the stage for Sloterdijkian spherology: "Evidently, we are dealing with a limit point beyond which the entire biopolitical horizon risks entering into a lethal contradiction with itself. . . . This doesn't mean that we can turn back the clock, perhaps reactivating the ancient figures of sovereign power. Today it is impossible to imagine a politics that doesn't turn to life as such, that doesn't look at the citizen from the point of view of his living body. But this can happen reciprocally in opposite forms that put into play the different meanings of biopolitics: on the one hand the self-destructive revolt of immunity against itself or the opening to its reversal in community" (*Immunitas* 170).

[11] There is nothing contrived about juxtaposing Sloterdijk and Derrida here, as the former has engaged very deeply with the latter's work. See his *Derrida, an Egyptian: On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid*, wherein he explores Derrida's philosophical influences and associative milieu.

[12] Here, I invoke Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, usually translated as *Civilization and its Discontents*. However, *Unbehagen* actually means something more like "uneasiness" or "dis-ease." For Freud, as for Gladney, one of the central paradoxes of civilization is that the very civilization that humanity has erected to protect itself from *Unbehagen* is, unbeknowest to society's most "civilized" devotees, the primary source of it.

[13] This comes as no surprise since Sloterdijk draws inspiration from the second-order systems theory promulgated by Niklas Luhmann, whose work builds on many of Bateson's critical insights.

[14] If Murray, the gleeful Baudrillardian proxy, figures as a parasite on the Gladney household, then so, too, does the "staticky" (*WN* 144) Mink, who resonates as a psychotic product of the mediastream. The triangular mimetic rivalry for Babette's love counterpoises Gladney's atavistic but precarious role as *pater famila* against the Scylla of Murray's carefree seductive polymorphous perversity (which is fundamentally incompatible with the "nuclear family") and the Charybdis of Mink's schizoid dissolution. Both of these valences figure prominently in Fredric Jameson's polemic against celebratory ahistorical postmodernism, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

[15] I am indebted to Derek Woods for this formulation, which opens DeLillo's work up to a different inflection of Baudrillardian analysis than that which is usually undertaken. In *The Transparency of Evil*, Baudrillard undertakes a Sloterdijkian analysis of the autoimmunitary trajectory of postmodern culture, whose exemplar is David Vetter, AKA the NASA "Bubble Boy": "Even without all the technological advantages of the Boy in the Bubble, we are already living in the bubble ourselves—already, like those characters in Bosch paintings, enclosed in a crystal sphere: a transparent envelope in which we have taken refuge and where we remain, bereft of everything yet overprotected, doomed to artificial immunity, continual transfusions and, at the slightest contact with the world outside, instant death. . . . This is why we are losing our defences. . . . All integrated and hyperintegrated systems—the technological system, the social system, even thought itself in artificial intelligence and its derivatives—tend towards the extreme constituted by immunodeficiency. Seeking to eliminate all external aggression, they secrete their own internal virulence, their own malignant reversibility. When a certain saturation point is reached, such systems effect this reversal and undergo this alteration willy-nilly -- and thus tend to self-destruct. Their very transparency becomes a threat to them, and the crystal has its revenge" (61-3).

[16] They also presage one of the side effects of Dylar, the medication Babette has been furtively consuming to further shield her from the dread of death. Dylar, the "ultimate postmodern drug" ("Tales"103), may cause those who consume it to mistake words for things, a further *reductio ad absurdum* of Heinrich's privileging of symbolic structures over sensory experience, suggesting perhaps that Heinrich is constitutively better equipped to deal with the dissimulatory valences of this medial milieu than his parents are.

[17] In this, the Gladneys figure as an *avant-la-lettre* variation on Agamben's *homo sacer*, "bare life" ensnared in the tripwires of digital modernity.

[18] Moreover, if anything belies the Gladney family's immunitary protection from the encroachments of the forces of annihilation, it is the toxic cloud. But even the miasma is figured as a media "event" that, for Gladney, ". . . resemble[s] a national promotion for death, a multibillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print, and billboard, TV saturation" (*WN* 73). This explains, in part, why he refuses to flee when he first finds out about the disaster: "I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are" (*WN* 117). Thus, his lines of psychic defense are manifold and deeply-integrated. He sees himself as buffered by his academic and economic "classes" (an issue I will pursue at some length) because, among other reasons, they distinguish him from the disaster victims he sees on TV. These media representations, according to Michael Valdez Moses, operate according to a sophisticated mechanism:

> First , they transform the deaths of all individuals . . . into yet another commodity intended for mass consumption. Second, by imposing an increasingly automatic and involuntary identification with the camera eye, the media fosters the illusion that the witnessing consciousness of the individual television viewer, like the media themselves, is a permanent fixture possessing a transcendental perspective. (Valdez Moses 73)

[19] Here, I deploy Fredric Jameson's term, as Jameson's ideas about "the cultural logic of postmodernism" are often employed in critical analyses of DeLillo's work. See Stephen Baker's *The Fiction of Postmodernity* a far-reaching exploration of the relevance of Jameson's ideas to DeLillo scholarship.

[20] Duvall makes the case that Murray is not so much the postmodern "reality tester" many critics make him out to be, as an unscrupulous dis-simulator who colludes with Babette, with whom he is perhaps having a not-so-surreptitious affair, to "script" gullible Jack's response to Babette's tryst with Mink (Duvall 342-3).

[21] In a bizarre recursive twist, Heinrich becomes a charismatic *Führer*, which literally means "leader" or "helmsman," when the family arrives at the camp, where a crowd gathers around his refined explication of the "event," of which he has a more fine-grained understanding than even the adults around him as a result of his superior "awareness of the environment" (*WN* 126).

[22] Frow suggests that there is some textual evidence as to the rhetorical motivation underlying many of these enigmatic parataxes, some of which, he claims, are less polysemous than others. The seemingly non-sequitur disruption "Dristan Ultra, Dristan Ultra," which occurs in a supermarket scene, is surrounded by inverted commas, suggesting "a diegetic source" (Frow 326) such as a PA system; others, according to Frow, would seem to emerge out of contextual and verbal associations (327).

[23] DeLillo got his start writing copy on Madison Avenue from 1959 to 1964, making him "the exact contemporary of Don Draper" (Kavanagh), an experience that echoes powerfully through novels like *White Noise*, *Americana*, and *Point Omega*.

[24] Duvall insists that "the market within supermarket serves as a reminder that television also is predicated on market relations" (Duvall 330).

[25] Two decades later, Lacanian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, now referred to *ad nauseum* as "the Elvis of cultural theory," has assumed a Siskind-like position and scrutinized the psychoanalytic underpinnings of the "Coke is it" mantra, which he sees as an exemplar of Lacan's *objet petit a*.

[26] In "Lust Removed from Nature," Michael Valdez Moses reads White Noise as an elaborate Heideggerian allegory of Dasein's *ek-static* confrontation with death, an interpretation that is not necessarily far afield, as Becker cites this dynamic in *The Denial of Death*.

[27] In a gesture towards Sloterdijkian mediaspheric optics, Lentricchia characterizes the expedition to the barn as one of White Noise's "primal scenes" because it seems to signify that "the environment of the image is the landscape—it is what (for us) 'landscape' has become, and it can't be turned off with the flick of a wrist. For this environment-as-electronic-medium radically constitutes consciousness and therefore (such as it is) contemporary community—it guarantees that we are a people of, by, and for the image" ("Primal Scenes" 415).

[28] Hayles' insight into the circulation of parataxes in *White Noise* is cogent, which makes it all the more bizarre that she does not make explicit reference to passages that showcase this rhetorical operation and, tragically, relies so heavily on Bruce Bawer's disparaging critique of DeLillo's supposed "stubborn adherence to a stylish, schematic view of modern America as a great big xerox machine" (Bawer 28). Cantor takes Bawer to task for his uncritical assumption that Hitler is as superficial an issue for DeLillo as he is for Gladney (Cantor 40), a conclusion that is not borne out by Cantor's reading or my own.

[29] Above and beyond this obvious intimation of disaster in hitching his wagon to Hitler's star, Gladney further undermines the figuration of Hitler's protective power by underscoring the fact that Hitler's voice became "a thrilling weapon" (*WN* 73) that so titillated his German audiences that they referred to his speeches as "Sex murders" (73). The structural logic of Gladney's own perspective on Hitler suggests that despite the protective resonance the *Fuhrer*'s epideictic rhetoric possessed for his crowd, these same speeches also re-mediated the crowd's protection-seeking affective economy into violent libidinal upsurges.

[30] We could pursue this line of inquiry even further. The lives of Himmler and Wagner are replete with ironic echoes of Gladney's predicament. Žižek speculates that Himmler's interest in the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita* derives from its proto-postmodern theories about the self, killing, and dying (*Puppet* 32); and there could be no better description of the medial logic of Gladney's predicament than the axiomatic line from Wagner's *Parsifal*, "the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you."

[31] Sloterdijk is clearly building on Derrida's deconstruction of Foucault's and Agamben's anthropocentric approaches to "biopolitics." By underlining the tendentious constructedness of the animal (*zoe*) – human (*bios*), Sloterdijk can wage a full assault on the supposed civility of digital modernity, a regime that has long been engaged in an elaborate experiment with the taming and bestializing potentials of humanity. Ironically, Sloterdijk has been much-maligned for this characterization by hypersensitive German critics and journalists, who mistake his polemic for Hitlerian eugenics. See Eric B. Brown's "The Dilemmas of German Bioethics" for a fuller account of the debate Sloterdijk's article set off.

[32] Contrary to initial appearances, Sloterdijk is not making the "modernist" move of staving off digital culture by way of a conservative immunitary apparatus but rather disclosing the mediatic

tensions that undulate through the seemingly tranquil pathways of the digital marketplace. Thus, his critique should be read in tandem with Stiegler's analyses of the biopolitical currents coursing through the "attention capturing" technologies of digital capitalism. In both cases, "the human," even in its premodern form, is always-already a technological construct.

[33] Here, I use "implication" in both the topological and juridical sense.

[34] Gladney's account would appear to have been plucked out of Ernest Becker's description of the fantasy structures employed to deny death: ". . . there is a great deal of falseness and self-deception in the cultural *causa-sui* project, but there is also the necessity of this project. Man needs a "second" world, a world of humanly created meaning, a new reality that he can live, dramatize, nourish himself in" (Becker 189).

[35] I borrow Gilles Deleuze's neologism, which he invented to better interrogate the more sinister aspects of inchoate digital biopolitics in what he calls contemporary "societies of control": "In the societies of control, . . . what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a code: the code is a password . . . . The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. . . . Individuals have become '*dividuals*' and masses [have become] samples, data, markets, or '*banks*'" (*Postscript to Societies of Control* 5).

[36] Here, we should remember the speculation from DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, that "drugs are scheduled to supplant the media" (*Americana* 347) in the American imaginary.

[37] It is tempting to modify Silvan Tomkins' concept of affective "analog amplifiers" and say that Gladney's media network functions as a "digital amplifier" of signals, noise, affect, and violence.

[38] A position that is, ironically, parodied by the old women whipping their hands around as though attempting to rewind a cartoon. Even the modernist pretense is mediated through the postmodern media network.

[39] This original title of the novel (which the Panasonic Corporation forced DeLillo to change) may also obliquely allude to Pan, the ancient Greek god of music, the wild, shepherds, and flocks. Pan, who is known for his bestial lasciviousness, is strongly associated with Peter Sloterdijk's patron saint, Diogenes the Cynic, the great dissimulator of ancient Athens who Plato characterized as "a Socrates gone mad" (Miller 83). See also Peter Sloterdijk's *A Critique of Cynical Reason*.

[40] Once again, this resonates with Gilles Deleuze's far-reaching account of biopolitical implications of "the generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure" in "Society of Control."

[41] This is a line of investigation—the murky relationship between garbage and consciousness (which is to say effluence and affluence)—that DeLillo pursues and narrativizes in *Underworld*.

[42] Most of the comparisons of *American Psycho* with DeLillo's work focus on its similarities with DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis*, which follows the limousined exploits of white male New York billionaire speculator and asset manager Eric Packer, who, over the course of the Joycean day covered in the novel, loses millions of his clients' and his own dollars by betting against the Japanese Yen and then murders his limousine driver/bodyguard. In terms of the articulation of the occupational violence genre, however, for reasons that this chapter will make clear, *White Noise* is a richer contrapuntal instance, especially with regard to the operation of the re-medial paradigm.

[43] One of the epigraphs with which Easton Ellis begins the novel is a Talking Heads song lyric— "And as things fell apart / Nobody paid much attention" ("Nothing but Flowers") — that, like a number of other cues in the novel, gestures towards the *re-medial* status of Bateman's experience of the world. The song is about the counterintuitive undesirability of a return to a pre-lapsarian world. Humanity, having had its desires shaped by digital modernity, the song suggests, is perhaps no longer capable of experiencing such a "peaceful oasis" ("Nothing but Flowers") as Edenic. Bateman and his cadre have created for themselves an artificial utopia, a *de facto* gated community that is violently purged of what they perceive as "filth"; but the admixture of violence and cultural sterility have turned their would-be oasis into a kind of schizoid perdition; hence, the opening lines: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" (*American Psycho* 1).

[44] The Lacanian notion of *extimacy* articulates the radical externality of the alienated subject's innermost experience of interiority. This is a phenomenon bound up with the experience of the *Unheimlich*, or uncanny, encounter with *Doppelgangers*. Such optics can go a long way towards framing Bateman's own *extimate* constitution and constellation of uncanny doubles.

[45] This is the name of a restaurant that Bateman frequents. Like everything else in his occupational sphere, there is nothing "raw" or unprocessed about it.

[46] This is echoic of the less vertiginous economy of interchangability in *Les Misérables*, in which Champmathieu is mistakenly imprisoned instead of JeanValjean.

[47] So much more remains to be said about the Girardian aspects of *American Psycho*. A good place to begin such a comprehensive analysis would be the fact that one of the novel's epigraphs is taken from Dostoyevsky's "Notes from the Underground," which is for Girard an unparalleled crucible of "mimetic rivalry."

[48] Here, Murphet relies on the concept of "rapport" employed by Lacan, for whom it signifies connection, ratio, and relationship. As such, it is an intrinsically medial concept.

[49] In addition to being a top-tier "name-brand" university, "Milton" serves as a reminder that Bateman's homogenized consumer utopia is being underwritten as a demonic *topos*, one in which the *daimons* that ventriloquize putatively autonomous subjects are the Culture Industry's "uneasy chorus of voices.

[50] "Debil" could suggest "the Devil," "debilitated," or "debilitating." Perhaps coincidentally, *debil* is also Serbo-Croation for "idiot." Clearly, Bateman is the idiot here, as his putative love poem for Bethany misses the mark by an obscene margin.

[51] The Indian mask which Patrick imagines himself wearing may well also allude to his tanning regime, a "technology of the self" that metamorphoses putatively neutral whiteness into non-whiteness.

[52] In *The Limits of Ferocity: Sexual Aggression and Modern Literary Rebellion*, Daniel Fuchs avers that Bateman's enthusiasm for and captious interpretation of "The Greatest Love of All" suggests that he must be understood as a pathological narcissist: "[h]is narcissism recalls Freud's tyrannical primary narcissism, that of the infant who sees the world as indistinguishable from his needs. But it also recalls the more conventional meaning, an egotist so bound up in his impulses as to make the rest of the world serve them" (Fuchs 352).

[53] We might add to Ferguson's list Bateman *Doppel* Craig McDermott's "fax frenzy [whereby he] won't take any of [Bateman's] phone calls, preferring to communicate by fax only" (*American Psycho* 383) and Bateman's own *ad nauseam* compulsive rerental of *Body Double*.

[54] A word that, appropriately, signifies "network," "matter," and "mother."

[55] Žižek avers that, *pace* the Western orientalist imaginary of Buddhism as a peaceful philosophy, many manifestations of the religion have historically been used to legitimate ruthless acts of violence (*Parallax View* 282). See also Brian Daizen Victoria's *Zen at War* for a more rigorous survey of the intricacies of these ideological operations in the world of Japanese Zen Buddhism.

[56] In the film, the employer in the self-beating scene is Joe's original office boss. In the novel, it is the boss at the Pressman Hotel, where Joe works as a waiter.

[57] The parallels with Schreber's paranoid experience of an emasculating "order of things" merit a separate study.

[58] Strangely, Kuhn, who perspicaciously connects this trope to the mad protagonist of Charlotte Perkin Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," draws the conclusion that the dark roses signify

Joe's anxieties about "romantic entanglement" with Marla, whom she views, in contrast to Tyler, as a "real" person within this narrative universe.

[59] This, pace the ending of David Fincher's otherwise fidelitous film adaptation of *Fight Club* in which Joe and Marla reunite, with the intimation that they may have a "real" future together.

[60] This line of enquiry is facilitated by the seemingly intrinsic mediality of the Empsonian pastoral, a mode organized around reducing the complexity of the environment (a mediatic operation that Niklas Luhmann imputes to "systems," which recursively reinscribe the system-environment distinction within a functionally-differentiated milieu).

[61] Most critics refer to Zuckerman's channeling of the Swede as "free indirect discourse." However, his absorption into the Swede's imagined lifeworld is so all-encompassing that he even conjures a groundswell of direct quotations, a form of reportage that transcends the "indirect" bounds of free indirect discourse.

[62] See Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended* and Sloterdijk's "Rule's for the Human Zoo," respectively.

[63] In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard tracks the role of the "hero's *askesis*," or seeming lack of desire, as a mimetic gravity field for the community at large, a dynamic, for Girard, that is bound up with the issue of the primordial communal drive to converge on "scapegoats" that condense *dis-eases* in the body politic.

[64] MacArthur goes on to suggest that *American Pastoral* articulates the "trauma of the Kennedy assassination and the ensuing cultural turmoil" (16). The Kennedy assassination is also the explicit subject-matter of DeLillo's 1988 novel *Libra* and it is a constantly-resurfacing motif throughout his oeuvre.

[65] The 1967 Apollo 1 rocket exploded, killing all of its crew members, an outcome that reverberates eerily with the neighbourhood Apollo's intergenerational space flight.

[66] Given the obvious corollary between the Swede's life trajectory and that of post-WW2 America, it is important to note that the decline of manufacturing in what was once "the workshop of the world" is, according to historians like Arnold J. Toynbee, a sign of the overall decline of a once ascendant civilization.

[67] Zeroing in on the Kennedy association, critic Gary Johnson views this derailing as a consequence of some of the allegorical narratives with which the Swede's life is entwined and locates the site of this derailing in Zuckerman's allegoresis, or unpacking, of the Kennedy allegory. What Johnson misses is the extent to which, as my analysis will show, every alllegory, every fantasmatic narrative, into which the Swede's life is enfolded—and there are many more

than Johnson seems to recognize—harbour such ironic unravellings. Kennedy, the Kid, and Johnny are all re-medial allegories that stage their own deconstructions over time. Even Levov's pre-eminent markings of "oneness with America," the "the Swede," "Apollo," and "Zeus," point to an ineradicable foreignness that he can never filter out.

[68] At the end of the novel, when Lou rails against *Deep Throat* and the pervasiveness of pornography in the 1970's, Orcutt cautions him that there is no means of immunizing children (or adults) against exposure to this toxic phenomenon. But then Orcutt mentions the "great outlaws" (*Pastoral* 365) Burroughs, Sade, and Genet, all of whose transgressive "pornographic" experiments long precede *Deep Throat*, suggesting that repressive containment measures such as those promulgated by Lou were always flimsy immunitary constructs.

[69] As another tropological fold in the racist undercurrent to the Swede's pastoral nexus, the incubator of "the indigenous American berserk," early Post Toasties Corn Flakes boxes often featured racist depictions of American Indians, used to advertise Roy Rogers "cowboy and Indian" pop-out cards.

[70] Here, I borrow from Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital*, wherein she develops just such a double sense of "rendering."

[71] "Grotesque" originally signified a style of decorative art in which human and animal forms were depicted with foliage and flowers. The term, which derives from the Italian word for "grotto" (i.e., the variety of room in ancient buildings where such art was most likely to be found), did not originally have a pejorative sense. Now, however, it denotes monstrosity, abnormality, distortion, and ugliness.

[72] As Zuckerman discovers, he is more of a Clark Kent.

[73] In "The Concept of Irony," Paul de Man interrogates the etymological sense of "trope" as "to turn," as in "a turn of speech," in order to explore whether irony, which constitutes a rhetorical centrifugal force, is a trope at all, characterizing it as a "trope of tropes, the one that names the term as the 'turning away'" (de Man 165).

[74] "Astonishment" - literally, "to turn into stone." When taken in the context of the re-medial logic of the novel, the "staid and stone-faced" Swede and his "Rimrock" stone castle are complicit in the re-mediation of the fortified patriarchal universe of the American Pastoral into Medusa's playground. See Hélène Cixous' seminal French feminist tract "The Laugh of the Medusa."

[75] The term "astonishment" derives from the Greek myth of Medusa the Gorgon, a female monster who could turn men to stone. When taken in the context of the re-medial logic of the novel, the "staid and stone-faced" Swede and his "Rimrock" stone castle are complicit in the re-

mediation of the fortified patriarchal universe of the American Pastoral into Medusa's playground.

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